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The Shadow Sport from Frisco;



OR,

CAPTAIN FLASH

THE

Man of Two Names.

A Story of the Twins of Tartarus.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HIRAM HAWK, THE HARLEM
DETECTIVE," "MAJOR BULLION," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TAOS AND TOPHET.

"THAR they be now. Jes' look at 'em an' say if you ever see'd such a pair."

"They are a curious brace of human beings, that's a fact. You call them what?"

THE SHADOW SPORT LOOKED DOWN AT HIS REVOLVERS, AND THEN INTO THE BRONZED FACES OF THE TWINS BEFORE HIM.

"The Golden Twins. They're from no whar in particular, but they're liable ter turn up at any moment, and from the time o' their appearance in a camp that place becomes unlucky."

"That's pretty hard to believe—"

"But it's a fact. Wait! I'll call Big Dave over here. Dave!"

At sound of his name a tall, broad-shouldered man, dressed in mining garments, left the counter against which he was leaning and crossed the floor of the "Tame Rattlesnake," Sunset's most prominent saloon.

The other introduced Dave to the handsome man who had lately entered the mining camp from the South, and Big Dave executed a laughable bow.

"Dave, the stranger here, don't jes' believe that the Twins bring misfortunes to the camps they strike."

"It's a genuine fact, stranger. I kin say from experience that they've haunted me for three year, an' that they're the means o' the depopulation o' half a dozen camps in this very region."

"What renders them Jonahs?" quietly asked the stranger, as he glanced out of the place and looked for a little while at two men who had just reached the square. "They don't look very harmful."

"Not to you, p'raps," answered the big man. "They would really be seraphs if they had wings, but at the same time you wouldn't want to run across 'em in the mountains on the trail."

"Would they hold you up?"

"Jemently, stranger! Hold you up? Not much! They'd rob you all the same, and by a process strictly their own. No one ever tried ter infringe on their patent, eh, Tom?"

"Not much, Dave. It would be worth the life o' the infringer er try it."

The stranger walked to the window and looked out, his well-knit figure an object of silent observation by the two men to whom he had spoken.

"Who is he, Tom?" asked Big Dave of Sunset.

"I don't know. Wonder if the captain's seen 'im?"

"Guess not. Likewise Centipede. Shall I post them?"

"Not yet. He's lookin' the Twins over from head ter foot, an' mebbe we kin stir up a rumpus and see some fun."

By this time the two men on the square had turned toward the saloon and were walking side by side in that direction.

They were strangely alike—large, raw-boned men, in rough clothes, with grimy faces and "hard" in every particular.

The stranger continued to regard them until it became certain that they intended to enter the Rattlesnake, when he drew back from the window and smiled.

"Ain't they daisies?" asked Dave.

"They seem to be."

"Well, they are, an' no mistake."

"What's their mission, if they have one?"

"That's one o' the mysteries o' these mountains. They never tell any one, and nothin' crops out."

"How often do they show up in Sunset?"

"They haven't been here for six months."

"What happened since they left?"

"We had a cyclone and a fire."

"I see. Jonahs!"

"An' a mine caved in, too."

"Anything else?"

"That's all, I guess, only I lost my revolver in the red ravine an' got bit by a rattler on the divide."

At this moment the door of the place opened and the foremost of the Twins made his appearance.

The other was at his heels, and the pair walked over to the counter, where they turned and quietly surveyed the company.

"They're Taos and Tophet," explained Tom, in a whisper, to the stranger. "I can't tell t'other from which, nor which from the other. But that's their names—Taos an' Tophet."

For a full minute the two men leaned against the counter without speaking.

They seemed to take delight in silently surveying the crowd and still further mystifying it as to their mission and real identity.

All at once one of the Twins threw his hat upon the floor and raised his hands above his head.

"Wal, we're back ag'in," he announced in a hoarse voice. "This is Sunset, the meanest one-hoss camp in the universe, an' tenanted by the meanest lot o' men under the shinin' sun."

Silence almost painful followed these words, but not a man moved.

"I second Taos' statement!" cried the other as he threw his hat beside the one already on the floor. "We've traveled over all the west, but a meaner lot o' heathen than the pards o' Sunset don't exist in it."

"Do you permit such insults here?" whispered the stranger as his eyes seemed to flash.

"What kin we do?" from Big Dave. "We can't fight men who bear charmed lives—"

In another second the stranger had stepped forward.

His outward mien was calmness itself, but for all any one knew a tempest might be raging in his bosom.

Taos and Tophet exchanged swift glances.

"Where are you men from?" demanded the unknown.

"That's our business," from Tophet.

"It may be mine as well."

"You'll have ter make it so, then. We are harmless travelers, but when we're stirred up, we kin be tigers."

"And cowards, as well!"

The silence which followed was like a death spell, and all eyes were fastened on the man who faced the Golden Twins.

In the middle of the room he stood, his head thrown back, his pantaloons stuck into the tops of his boots and his face as calm and unruffled as a day in May.

His mild blue eye did not forbode danger to any one, but his hands at his sides indicated his readiness for what was sure to ensue.

The Golden Twins did not move, for the moment, studying the stranger, as if to "size him up."

"Who be you?" ventured Taos.

"I'm Sam Sherlock, known as Sandy Sam."

"Eh? What? Sam Sherlock o' Frisco?"

"Yes, the same!"

"Then, we challenge you."

It was Tophet who spoke, and the emphasized words rang through the room like a menace and command.

"Challenge me, do you? And what for, may I ask?"

"Sam Sherlock knows."

"Stand back thar, men!" now exclaimed Taos, pushing toward the door and almost throwing two men against the wall. "This is ter be a fair fight an' no breakin' over ther ropes."

"Who's goin' fer fight?" ventured Big Dave.

"Tophet an' Sherlock thar."

Meantime Tophet had stepped back and thrown one hand toward his hip, but it had stopped there.

"You don't want to fight me?" from Sherlock, quietly spoken.

"I've given the challenge. I call ye a liar from the ground up an' a coward!"

The handsome stranger merely laughed and did not resent the imputation.

"You've got ter fight Tophet, Sam Sherlock!" cried the other twin. "He's sent there challenge an' you've got ter meet him."

"I don't fight a man like that," and the finger of Sandy Sam covered the astonished Tophet.

For a second no answer was heard, and then the hand of Tophet came back from his hip, but it gripped nothing.

"You'll drink with us, then?" he asked.

"I will not."

The Twins once more exchanged glances and moved toward the door.

"Halt!"

It was Sandy Sam who spoke, and he looked at the pair as they halted near the door.

"You're going to leave Sunset, aren't you?"

"When we're ready!"

"And you're going away now, eh?"

"Not much we ain't!" defiantly.

"You will get away from Sunset by sundown," continued Sandy. "You needn't ask me why."

"We won't go. Thar!"

Sam seemed to look beyond the door, over the heads of the Golden Twins.

"Remember! I will give you till sundown," said he. "Don't forget the hour!"

Then, turning from the pair, he stepped to the end of the bar, lit a cigar and puffed away.

For a little while the exchange of hate seemed imminent, for the tall twins were nervous with anger, but Sam was, seemingly, quite unconcerned under their tigerish glances, and placidly saw them turn suddenly and walk from the saloon.

"They won't leave, pard stranger," assured Big Dave. "You kin prepare for business. They've got blood in their eyes to-night."

"We'll see," was the reply. "Where do they put up when they come to Sunset?"

"They've got no reg'lar place. They jes' loaf 'round an' make the hull camp their headquarters."

"They'll not be hard to find if they should stay," observed Sandy, "but my opinion is they won't be here at sundown."

And, rolling a gold piece down the counter, the sport—for such he evidently was—ordered the barman to "set 'em up" to all, while he walked out without looking back to see if his instructions had been obeyed or to take any change.

"I wonder if the captain or Centipede knows that man?" whispered Big Dave to Tom, his companion.

Tom shook his head.

"He's a cool, dangerous devil—more so than the Twins. Sam Sherlock, eh? I'll see them at once. I'll take the back-door route, so he won't suspect."

Big Dave swallowed his mountain poison and bolted for a little door at the rear of the Rattlesnake.

In a moment he was out in the open air and made tracks down a dingy alley to a house more pretentious than many in Sunset.

It stood alone, surrounded by a commodious yard, sprinkled with young pines. Past these he went, to the front door, and, without a warning knock, burst into a room where two men sat at a table playing cards.

"Hello, David!" cried the eldest of the pair. "You look as if you had seen a ghost—"

"Do either of you know Sam Sherlock?" was demanded.

"Yes! yes!" was the instant rejoinder. "Where is he?"

"In Sunset!—ther coolest devil what ever invaded ther camp. Why, he's jes' ordered ther Golden Twins out o' camp, but they won't go. It's blood, I say; but it won't be his'n, I'll bet my head!"

CHAPTER II.

A SHADOWED HONEYMOON.

Captain Fiery Flash was one of the noted residents of Sunset.

No one seemed to know anything about his antecedents and none cared to inquire.

He sometimes went by the name of Elegant Flash, but the military title seemed to please him best, though he had never won it by any service in the field, and at last, by common consent, the roughs and toughs of the Montana camp came to designate him thus.

It was the captain into whose presence Big Dave rushed with the intelligence of Sandy Sam's presence.

The captain's companion was a smaller man, yellow of face like a Mexican, and known as Centipede.

If he had another name it was never

heard in Sunset, and he never enlightened its citizens in this direction.

Fate or fortune, probably both, had drawn the pair together, and in the captain's house behind the young pines more than one game and not a few plots had been played and hatched.

For a moment after Big Dave's announcement the pair looked at one another as if dismayed; then Centipede spoke, to ask:

"How does he look?"

"Look? Why, like the concentrated essence of fight, and as cool as a gun on the wall. Why, he never smiled when the crowd cheered him after givin' Taos and Tophet their walkin' papers. His eyes are blue and mild, but there's a devil in 'em all the same."

"You are right," answered Centipede. He arose, and stepping to the window looked out upon the yard beyond the pines.

Captain Flash interestedly watched his companion a few moments; then he called him back.

"You heard all that Dave said. Sam has given them until sundown to leave the camp."

Centipede nodded. "The Twins can shoot," he said, suggestively. "I've seen 'em tried in the Gold Range."

Centipede's lips curled and were compressed as he spoke; he did not seem to recall the circumstance with any degree of pleasure.

"They are two. He is one. That ought to settle it."

"But, captain, he is a host if he takes a notion. We kin see that in his eye," put in Big Dave.

"I know—a host as long as one doesn't get the drop on him," smiled Flash. "Centipede here knows him a little better than I do."

Centipede touched the butt of the weapon on his hip, but did not speak again.

"Where is he now?" asked the captain.

"He walked out o' the Rattlesnake just afore I did," was the reply. "He may be down at the Winged Lazarus."

"He's entered Sunset at a bad time," avowed Flash. "I don't like it."

Centipede grinned.

"He must not play out his hand, whatever it is."

"We can check him, captain, if necessary," assured Big Dave.

"We must, but quietly. There must be no show of power unless it is absolutely necessary—no open display of it, I mean."

"I understand."

"If the Twins show fight, and they're liable to do that under the circumstances, they may prove too much for Sandy."

"But, if they run, we must match him, eh?"

"That's it, boys!" asserted Flash; "you will go out and take care of the situation; but, mind you, if the Twins show fight let them have it out. If they give Sunset the go-by between now and sundown, why, we'll have to take the matter in hand, ourselves; that is the order."

Centipede and Big Dave left the room, but in the cramped hallway beyond the door the hand of the smaller man fell warningly upon Dave's arm.

"He's bound to make it win, this time. The wedding takes place to-morrow."

"The gal's consented, then?"

"It's all fixed; but, here this man from the coast drops in an'—"

Centipede looked away and seemed to wish to say no more.

"Centipede, what's the trouble? Why is this man so hated by the captain?" Dave wished to be advised.

"An' by me, too, eh?"

"By both o' you, but more particularly by the captain. I never saw him so worked up over one man's comin' ter Sunset. War they rivals for her hand? It can't be that, Centipede?"

"Right, Dave. They're not rivals that way, but they're enemies."

"What made them so?"

"It's a long story an' a queer one. It dates back three years, durin' which time we've enjoyed quiet here."

"Yes, quite," sarcastically, Big Dave recalling the many tragic incidents connected with the history of Sunset during those years. "You needn't tell the story now, Centipede. Time enough for that. Now, we must go out and watch the situation, as the captain orders. My opinion is the Twins will fight."

Captain Flash was not left alone for long.

Five minutes after the departure of Dave and Centipede the door again opened, but this time by a woman—a woman to attract notice wherever seen—tall, and the possessor of a supple figure and coal-black eyes.

The whole camp knew her as Montana Maude, but just what relation she bore to Captain Flash, if any, was a little secret which the two did not care to reveal.

Maude faced Captain Flash, somewhat disconcerted in temper, apparently.

With a smile the captain asked:

"What's up now? Has she gone back on her promise?"

"Not that," was the reply. "She couldn't do that and keep my esteem, you know."

"That's good. The matter will be fully settled to-morrow at ten; and, when the Wind-Flower of Sunset is the bride of Captain Flash, why, we'll be in clover."

"You still have the old map?"

"Just as if I would touch a match to it and see it go up in smoke! I've not lost my mind yet, Maude."

"What's all this rumpus down at the Tame Rattlesnake?" she demanded.

"You've heard of it, then?"

"Yes; I saw those two destroying angels, the Golden Twins, pass my house a while ago, and Gallatin George stopped to say something about a stranger giving them orders to get out."

"It is true. A man called Sam Sherlock—Sandy Sam—took it upon himself to order the Twins out of camp, but they don't seem to take kindly to the command. I believe they mean fight."

"Good!" and the face of the woman lit up with eagerness. "I want to see the rumpus. Where will they fight it out?"

"On the square, I presume."

"When?"

"He gave them until sundown."

"Then, I'll keep an eye open for the fun," said she. "What is he like, this Sandy Sam, as you call him?"

"He is a good-looking fellow, a cool one, a dare-devil, a man of sand all in one."

"Aha! you've met him before?"

"Once," answered Flash, but his gaze avoided Montana Maude's questioning face.

"The Twins ought to be too much for one man," she went on. "But, if he is handy with the trigger, as you imply, and the Twins a little slow, why, after all, it may be a one-sided affair."

"If it should turn out that way the man of sand may have to fight Sunset."

"Do you mean that?" demanded Maude. "Do you tell me that, if the dare-devil wins, all Sunset will jump upon him?"

"It may be so," and the Flash sport again looked away.

"That wouldn't be fair."

"Fair enough for our side. We must have no interlopers here, now, Maude."

"On the eve of your wedding, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"Why, that would give zest to the honeymoon," and the woman laughed.

The captain's brows contracted, as he responded:

"I am master here. I am the boss of Sunset, and my authority is not to be taken from me by a man like that," he almost hissed. "That would mean that I was to be driven out of this mountain Eden."

"Ah! Indeed! That's the peril, is it? But there's the unfairness of overpowering one man—of double-banking him after his victory."

"You must want to stand by this Sandy Sam."

"I don't know him."

"Very well! Then don't speak in his favor. He's a very dangerous visitor to the camp, just now."

Montana Maude passed out, but stood in the gathering dusk among the pines and looked back at the house.

A short distance away was the square of Sunset, and near it the main hostelry called the Winged Lazarus.

The woman walked toward this square and crossed it, being observed by a group of men who, at her appearance, talked of her as being a mystery in the mountain camp.

Maude proceeded on to the little hotel with the roughly built front porch. The door stood open, but the shadows within prevented her from noting much of the interior.

While she was looking there stepped out upon the porch the man for whom perhaps her keen eyes sought—the Man of Sand—Sandy Sam Sherlock.

He stood there, on the porch, a moment, showing off his well-knitted figure, and Montana Maude watched him with keen interest.

"That's the man!" said she to herself. "That's the man of danger, is it? Why did he come here just now? I wonder if he's heard of the coming nuptials? I wonder if it was that which brought him to Sunset?"

Sandy Sam stepped from the porch and Maude drew back beyond observation, yet continuing to scrutinize him.

Soon the man from Frisco stepped from the porch and away.

"He's handsome as an Apollo, and I guess as brave as an Achilles. I don't wonder the brute Twins quailed before him. If I thought all Sunset would pounce upon him if he ended their ugly career, why, I would take his part myself."

"You would?"

The woman turned at the words as if she had heard the warning of a rattler behind her.

"Ha! Is it you?" she cried.

"It's me—Centipede," was the answer, and the yellow-skin sport grinned. "If you take that man's part you must part company with us, you know."

"You overheard me, did you, you—"

"Don't call names, Maude! That man, I tell you, is the terror of Sunset. He will smite and blight the captain's wedded life. He will make us beggars; he is a man without a soul, the sport with the steel heart, coming from where they raise nothing but devils!"

At that moment a shout was heard up the narrow street, and Maude clutched Centipede's arm as the report of a six-shooter quivered the air.

"Look!" cried the yellow man. "The ball has opened! First blood for the Golden Twins!" and he broke into a shout of almost fiendish laughter.

CHAPTER III.

SANDY SAM'S DEFIANCE.

Side by side in the early dusk stood Taos and Tophet, the Golden Twins.

Their boot-straps almost touched as they stood erect, like giants, in the full flush of their great prowess, a revolver in the right hand of each and their faces turned toward the spectators who from a distance thought to be safe, watched the opening of Sunset's newest and most exciting drama.

The pistol shot had reverberated throughout the camp, and by common consent the various resorts emptied themselves, as if they knew that the Man of Sand had met the twin terrors from the Montana ranges.

A grim smile illumined the faces of the Twins, and from the half-lifted weapon of Taos a thin curl of smoke rose skyward.

In front of the pair stood the human

target, who had stepped backward as the revolver spoke, but who now stood rigid, as if beating off death, while he answered the enemy, shot for shot.

"He didn't get him," whispered Centipede to the breathless woman.

"No, thank heaven!" was the fervent answer, and Centipede gave Maude a quick, resentful, questioning look.

"You don't mean that? What would the captain say?"

"I care not what he would say. It's two to one, you see, and Captain Flash says the camp will double-bank him if he wins the fight."

"We'll do more than that," grated Centipede. "We don't intend to let that Frisco man-hunter run us out."

"Run you out? Why, he hasn't tried to do that. What do you mean?"

"Never mind; that's what he's here for, an' on the eve of ther captain's weddin'. He knew what was up."

"Look!" cried Maude. "They are shortening the distance between them. Oh, it is to be a duel to the death!"

Sandy Sam had advanced toward the Twins, and his commanding figure rose between the spectators and the duelists.

Maude held her breath for excitement, but suddenly she heard Centipede utter an execration.

"The cowards!" snarled the yellow man. "Their courage has all oozed out! See, they cower!"

"It is sundown," was heard the voice of the man from the coast. "It is go or death!" and the finger of Sandy Sam pointed toward the hills visible beyond the mountain camp.

"It is sundown!" he repeated, in the same commanding tones. "You have but a few seconds more!"

The Twins did not wait, but at once turned their backs to the Man of Sand and walked toward the confines of Sunset.

"Cowards!" repeated Centipede. "We'll have to take up the quarrel now."

Sherlock watched the burly forms of the Twins until they had turned a bend in the trail and vanished.

"I thought they had more grit than that," muttered the yellow man at Montana Maude's side. "They've had nerve enough all along, but they've lost it, curse them!"

"They knew their man," and Montana Maude's eyes seemed to twinkle with delight as she spoke.

Sam Sherlock turned toward the square, while the man with the Malay-like face walked away.

The look he gave Maude said plainly, "Don't talk to him," but the woman, who doubtless interpreted it rightly, did not obey, for she remained in the middle of the street, apparently waiting for Sandy Sam to come up.

She watched him with the utmost curiosity and smiled as he tipped his broad-brimmed hat in a gallant manner.

Sherlock halted, when the woman at once noticed on his neck near the flannel collar a dark stain.

"You've been near death!" she said, her eyes fastened on the discoloration.

Sam put up his hand and brought away some half-dried blood, at which he looked a moment.

"Tophet is the better shot, I understand," said he, grimly, "but somehow or other Taos took the initiative to-day and missed."

"You felt the bullet?"

"A slight twinge, nothing more; but this miss is as good as a long mile. However, it will serve to recall the Twins some other time. I do not know, lady, to whom I am speaking."

"I am Maude—Montana Maude, as the men of Sunset call me," was the response. "I happened to hear a little something concerning your orders to the Twins, and confess that I am glad they have left you in undisputed possession of the field."

"For the present," returned the other. "Then you expect to encounter the pair again?"

"Why not? The snake is only scotched. These mountain stranglers will turn up again and doubtless in my path. It will be just my luck; but the next time, perhaps, the fight will be fought to a finish. This was barely a skirmish."

Sandy Sam gazed away, and the woman, with a swift glance toward Captain Flash's house, said, in lowered tones:

"Your coming to Sunset seems to have disturbed others besides the Twins."

The handsome stranger's eyes opened with some amazement, and he was silent a brief moment.

"Perhaps," he said. "My coming to other camps besides this has disturbed some people."

"You are in more danger than you were from the Golden Twins—do you know that?"

"Indeed? It would be a poor day if I did not meet with some risk and peril."

"You don't dread peril, then?"

"Not exactly that. I am not one to seek danger for danger's sake alone. A man with a mission meets it at nearly all times. It is a part of the trail."

They were walking away, and the face of the woman, impressed with anxiety, was upturned to his.

"Do you know your foes in Sunset?" she asked.

"I know some of them."

"But the whole camp is against you."

"Are you?"

Maude flushed and dropped her gaze.

"I am no person's real enemy," she answered, hesitatingly.

"Then I am to be disturbed during my stay in Sunset, you think?"

"Yes; that is what I think."

"By Kiddled Eric?"

Montana Maude shook her head. "I know no such person," she responded.

"I have lived five years in Sunset, and to my knowledge such a person has never been here."

"What do you call him, then?"

Quite puzzled, Maude walked a little way in silence.

"We have so many toughs here, so many men with secret histories, chapters of which are dark, as I do not doubt, that I cannot tell you what their names were elsewhere."

Sandy Sam looked down into the inquiring eyes.

"Then he is not known here as Kiddled Eric, that is evident. What do you call the man who left your side a while ago?"

"That was Centipede."

"Centipede, with his poison?" laughed Sam.

"You are right. He is a deadly little crawling thing."

"And what is his master's name?"

"He is Captain Flash's companion."

"There you have it!" said Sandy Sam. "I needn't name Kiddled Eric now."

Montana Maude started.

"I see! You call Captain Flash Kiddled Eric."

The handsome sport nodded, but did not confirm her guess by word.

"I never heard him called by that name," declared Montana Maude. "We know him here as Captain Flash, sometimes as Elegant Flash, for he is a sport in the truest acceptance of the term."

"Like he used to be! Where is he?"

Maude pointed toward the house behind the pines, and Sandy Sam looked eagerly in the direction indicated.

"But you won't go thither?" she cried, seeing him about to move in that direction.

"Why shouldn't I? Captain Flash, I learn, is the Boss of Sunset, and I ought to pay my respects to him, don't you think?"

"Heavens, no! It would be rushing right into the tiger's lair."

"You know the tiger, then?"

"Who knows him better?" cried Maude, with a smile, and for a moment she looked at Sandy Sam with surprise.

"You will see him to-morrow, on his wedding day," she went on, and then wished she had not imparted the secret.

"His wedding day? You don't tell me that Captain Flash is to wed to-morrow?"

"That is the announcement."

"Who is the happy woman?"

"Effie, the Windflower of Sunset—the old miner's ward."

"Where is she?"

Sandy Sam's interest in Captain Flash seemed to have ceased suddenly, and to have transferred itself to the young girl mentioned.

Maude hesitated to answer the last question. Perhaps she had gone too far already.

"I would see the bride expectant," continued the stranger sport. "Effie, the Windflower of Sunset? It's a pretty jumble of names. I trust it fits her."

"Who are you, man?" exclaimed Maude. "You must not see this young creature, if you have in view the blighting of her happiness. I am her guardian."

"The more reason why I should see her. Come! Is she beyond the square, or will we find her in the other direction—the one taken by the Twins in their flight from Sunset?"

"Not on my life will I take you to Effie, the Windflower! I dare not."

"You fear Kiddled Eric?"

"I am Captain Flash's friend."

"Ho! the friend and companion of the Boss of Sunset!" smiled the sport.

"Never mind! Don't let me draw upon you his displeasure. She is up the street yonder?"

No answer.

"Good-night!" and Sandy Sam touched his hat to the silent woman.

"Do you intend to hunt her up?" demanded Maude. "You must not interfere with the ceremony to-morrow!"

"I have not threatened to. But I shall see the young girl who is to become the bride of Kiddled Eric, if nothing happens, and you can bear my intentions to him, if you care to."

For the first time the eyes of Montana Maude seemed to flash, but they soon got a softer light.

"It will be death to some one," said she. "It may mean the sudden determination of your career. If you will seek danger and death—if you are resolved to search the shanties of Sunset until you find Effie—then let me shorten your quest. It is the fifth house from the end of yon street. You will find her there, but woe to you, Sandy Sam, if you come between Captain Flash and his bride!"

Once more the hand of the Western sport touched the rim of his hat, and in another moment he was walking away, intensely regarded by the silent woman in the middle of the street.

CHAPTER IV.

SANDY SAM AND THE BRIDE-ELECT.

Sandy Sam kept on until he reached the house designated as the home of Effie, the Windflower of Sunset.

It was a neater dwelling than some of its neighbors, and showed about it the work of fair hands.

He would have found the place without the woman's help, for he had seen a young girl for a moment in the doorway, and guessed that it was the abode of beauty and virtue.

The hand of the sport was on the rude latch, when the door suddenly opened, and Sam Sherlock was looking into the face of the one he sought.

It was the face of a girl of nineteen, with a fine, willowy figure, which was grace itself, clear, brown eyes, and cheeks of rare freshness.

This fair creature the sport did not doubt was Effie of Sunset, and, while she held the door open, he stepped inside.

As the sun had gone down, a light was already burning on the table, in the middle of the room, and the girl's figure was thrown in shadow against the white-washed wall.

"You met them, did you?" she remarked, with a smile. "They passed here muttering vengeance against some one,

and I'm sure I saw you face them awhile ago."

Sandy Sam bowed in return as he answered:

"We came together rather unexpectedly. I hardly hoped to see the Twins in Sunset, but they're liable to turn up anywhere."

"They're constantly doing that, and it is said that ill-luck follows in their wake. Do you believe that?"

"That is the current rumor. They are ugly enough to engender misfortunes."

"I am glad they're gone, for I do not want them here to-morrow," she said.

"Because it is to be your wedding day?"

Effie flushed, and, for a little while, averted her gaze.

"It would not be nice to have such Jonahs in the camp on that occasion," she replied. "You have been told of it, then?"

"Yes. That is a secret which is very hard to keep."

"I did not know it was common talk in Sunset, for we had not yet given the news out."

Sandy Sam, who leaned slightly against the wall near the door, watched the play of light and shadow on the fair face before him. He seemed to detect a shade of sorrow there, as if, after all, the coming event was not entirely pleasing to her.

"You are the old miner's ward, are you not?" he quietly asked.

"I was, but you know he is dead."

"Yes."

"It was a strange death. He was found dead in the mountain, and I always thought they kept something from me."

"The truth about his death, miss?"

"That is it—the truth about his death."

"Do you think he met with foul play?"

"Something tells me that he did. Raper Donalds was a man of strange parts, and he was a secret-keeper of some kind. In the first place, he had in his possession a map drawn on parchment, not much longer than my hand—I saw it once, but only for a moment—which he guarded as a man guards the most momentous secret. He never would tell me what the map meant, but he said, time and again, that it should be mine when he died, and that he would leave a key to it in a certain place. But he never got to tell me where."

"What became of the map when he died?"

"It vanished utterly."

"Did he carry it on his person?"

"Yes, next to his skin, over his heart."

"And the key?"

"He was to tell me sometime where that was."

"Then you have lost both key and map?"

"Yes, both of them," answered Effie. "Old Raper, who could not have been my father, had a presentiment that he would not live long. He once asked me to go out and look in the dust at the door of the shanty, and see if there was not a foot-track there. I found it just as he feared and reported."

"Well?"

"He simply turned his head away and muttered something I did not understand. But once, after that, he went into the hills, and that time he remained there."

"It was the time they found him dead, was it?"

"That was the time. He was found by Taos and Tophet, the Twins, and they brought him into Sunset on their shoulders, birds of ill-omen that they always are."

"They may have robbed the dead, miss."

"I have thought so, for when we came to look for the map it had vanished."

"The Twins did not remain long that time, did they?" asked Sherlock.

"They didn't go away until after the burial. They attended that, and I remember they stood apart talking in low tones, while Pastor Jack, a strange man we used to have in camp, read the serv-

ice. I can see the Twins now, with their odd-looking faces close together, and their eyes fixed on the body at the edge of the grave. After all was over, Tophet walked to the grave and looked into it with a grim face, as if silently repeating an oath. Both men vanished so quickly that when the citizens of Sunset came to look for them they were not to be found."

"They vanish strangely sometimes," observed Sam, with a faint smile. "But will you not let me talk about your coming nuptials, miss?"

"Why should they concern you?"

"Time will tell. You love this man?"

Effie colored again and started violently.

"I am to become his wife to-morrow," said she, evasively.

"But is there love in the match, on your part?"

"You must not go so far," she exclaimed. "Suffice it that I am to wed Captain Flash."

"With Montana Maude's consent?"

"Yes. She is my friend now. I cannot think that she would deliberately wreck my happiness. Captain Flash is the boss of Sunset. He is one of the nabobs of Montana, and—and I am almost alone."

There was a deep appeal in the girl's words. It touched the seemingly impassive sport.

"You dare not resist the mandate," said he. "You would not dare refuse to become the bride of Captain Flash, that is it."

"Why should I resist?" she demanded. "I am to spend my life here. I have no future but the one they show me. Who told you about my coming marriage, and how do you know that I dare not lift a finger against it?"

The Windflower of Sunset had taken a quick step forward, and her hand dropped like a snowflake upon Sam Sherlock's arm.

"It is true! I dare not resist! I am in the hands of fate, as it rules in Sunset."

Her face was pale and more beautiful than ever, and the sport looked into it a moment without speaking.

"You do not love this man?"

"No! no! How can I?"

"Yet you will go with him to the altar and be given away by this woman, who pretends to have your best interests in view?"

"It cannot be otherwise. It is my fate!"

"What would happen if you would resist; absolutely refuse to wed Captain Flash?"

"My God! I dare not think of such a thing," cried Effie. "Why do you put it into my head?"

"For your own good, dear girl—for your future happiness and peace."

Effie stepped back and halted at the table, where she seemed to be all atremble.

"This is foolhardiness in you," said she. "You are tempting fate yourself, I know not what brought you to Sunset, but you must not get into trouble on my account. I am a waif, the ward of the old miner, who was a man of mystery. I am in the hands of those who say they would not mar my happiness by word or deed."

"Yet they want you to become the wife of Kiddled Eric!"

This name, which had so mystified Montana Maude, seemed to drop from the sport's tongue unbidden.

Effie did not let it pass her.

"Speak that name again!" said she, bounding forward. "I heard him speak it once, and only once!"

"Raper Donalds?"

"Yes. He was alone in this room, and I came in without disturbing him. He was talking to himself, and he spoke the name you have just uttered. But the next moment he heard my step, and, turning white, he wanted to know why I had disturbed him."

"So he knew the name? Well, Miss Effie, it is a name to be hated and feared—by some!"

"Is it connected with the career of Captain Flash, my—"

She paused, and did not proceed; a flush stole over her face, and then as suddenly left it white again.

"Montana Maude is your friend?" queried the sport.

"I have found her so."

"When did you first meet her?"

"Two years ago."

"Here?"

"Yes; here in Sunset."

"She is also the friend of Captain Flash?"

"Certainly. She could not be otherwise and enjoy life here. I have trusted Maude. She seems a sister to me instead of a friend, but sometimes I cannot make her out."

"Would you escape this sacrifice if you could?" asked Sandy Sam.

"I cannot escape it."

"That does not answer my question, miss. Would you escape it if an avenue of escape were opened?"

"I might walk from one shadow into another."

"Or into a life happier than the one which awaits you as the wife of Captain Flash?"

"You hate him?"

"I know the man," was the reply. "I know more about this boss of Sunset than you ever dreamed of. I know him and his shadow, the yellow viper—"

"Centipede?" interrupted Effie, with a perceptible shudder. "That is the one human being I fear here. His hands once touched me, and I screamed, yet I once faced a bear with a revolver and acquitted myself creditably, they tell me."

"Girl!" and the hand of Sam Sherlock closed firmly, but without roughness, upon Effie's arm. "You must not enter into this lifelong bargain with Captain Flash."

"Why not?"

"I am here to save you!"

The look in his eyes startled the girl, and she drew back a pace and gazed at him, speechless.

"Then you knew I was here?" she asked.

"I did."

"And I am a part of your mission to Sunset?"

"A part only, but not an unimportant part. I say you shall not marry Captain Flash to-morrow!"

"What will you do?"

"I am here to prevent anything of that kind."

"And to perish rashly! Better let Effie become his bride than that you shall die like others have died in Sunset—with their boots on, as they call it here."

"Leave that to me," was the reply.

"The ward of Raper Donalds, the man of mystery, shall not become the wife of Captain Flash! For once the plans of this man of evil shall fall to the ground!"

"How can you—one man against all Sunset—prevent the wedding?"

"It is not one against a solid camp. There are others; but, whether they speak or not, this infamous marriage will not take place at the appointed hour. Control your nerves, my child, and wait."

CHAPTER V.

THE HOLD UP.

"What shall we do?"

The man who put this question to his companion stood on a large boulder, which overlooked the lights of Sunset.

His stalwart figure was outlined against the sky, and his bronzed face, covered from his lips down with a hard beard, rendered him a veritable ogre of the hills.

Taos and Tophet, the Golden Twins, had quitted the mining camp in no enviable frame of mind.

They had turned their backs on the Man of Sand just when the denizens of Sunset expected to witness a tragedy, and side by side, like brothers in adversity, had tramped forth to the spot on the hillside from which they could survey the

scene of their discomfiture and abasement.

The question had been put to Tophet, who, hard of face, like his brother, and, like him, an outlaw, looked down upon the camp for a moment in silence.

Taos waited, watching his companion with the ken of an eagle, and did not repeat the query.

Tophet seemed to be thinking hard; he ran his hand through his beard, and then turned to the man on the bowlder.

"Let 'im be," he said at last. "He's in the hornet's nest. He'll get stung thar—stung to death, fer the hull camp's against 'im."

"I know that, but he made us cowards."

"And we saved our lives. In another second he would have had the drop on us, an' we wouldn't be hyar. But, it's all right now. If Sam Sherlock gets out o' the hive we'll find 'im later on."

"Come, then," cried Taos, and, stepping from the flat bowlder, wrote across it a straggling line with a bit of red-stone, taken from the depths of his pocket:

"We is fer fight!" T. & T."

Then this strange pair tramped from the spot, walking deeper into the range, and finally vanishing.

Half an hour later they might have been seen standing at the mouth of a pass, like mountain ogres, with their faces turned toward the heart of the gulch, and listening intently.

"It's comin'," announced Taos.

Tophet shifted the revolver from one hand to the other, and waited.

Presently the rumble of wheels came plainly to their hearing, and they gazed down the gulch, lit up here and there by the light of the moon o'erhead.

"Make no mistake," continued Taos. "It's the Sunset stage, and it's our prey."

The two men waited a little longer, when, out of moonlight and shadow came a vehicle, drawn by four horses, with a man seated, half asleep, on the box.

As the stage lumbered into better view the two pards separated a little more, and then came the warning—

"Halt!"

The man with the lines roused himself at once and pulled the animals back.

"The Twins from Tartarus!" cried he, and he leaned over the seat and said to some one inside:

"Don't shoot! They've got the drop on the whole shootin' match."

"Why don't you go on?" came from the interior of the vehicle. "I can drop both of them—"

"Don't, for God's sake! Think of my wife an' children," cried the driver.

"I'm thinking of myself, sir. I don't propose to be robbed by a brace of American Jack Shepards. Move up, I say!"

"It's worth my life to do it."

"Very well! I see both of them. Get a little closer and I'll show you two dead highwaymen in the road."

Taos and Tophet caught but little of this conversation between the driver and his passenger, but what little they caught drew them closer.

The man in the stage, a young fellow, plainly dressed, but with a courageous look, and a cocked revolver in his right hand, leaned toward the window, his eye fastened on the twin road-agents.

"Come down out o' that!" cried Taos. "We've got you kivered."

The next moment came the report of a revolver, and the Twin's hat went spinning from his head.

At the same time the man inside ducked his head and escaped the bullet that Tophet sent at him, with the quickness of a cat.

Then another shot from within the coach, and Taos spun round like a totum, and dropped in the middle of the road.

"Move now!" thundered the passenger. "Go straight ahead, and don't mind the fellow in the road!"

Jehu clutched the lines and grated his

teeth, but the horses, plunging with fear, did not know what to do.

"Here, let me have the ribbons," said a voice at his side, as the passenger clambered upon the top of the vehicle and wrenched the leathers from his hands. "You ought to be pushed off into the wolf's jaws."

The passenger brought order out of chaos in the twinkling of an eye, for he soon had the team under his control, and Tophet, bending over his stricken brother, had to spring aside to keep from being ground to pieces beneath the hoofs and the wheels.

In a jiffy the team, plunging like mad, was far from the scene of the hold-up, and the young passenger still held the lines.

"There! I guess you're out of the fire now," he said coolly to the driver, as if at last relinquished the lines. "It was quite a little scene."

"Bless me if it wasn't death," was the answer. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Yes; and worse," with another smile. "I've had several little experiences like that. You call them the Twins, do you?"

"The Golden Twins—the two-of-a-kind—that infest these parts. They strangle men."

"That's what. They do it so slick that no one can catch them. I've seen their victims more than once. They are the thugs of Montana, an' I've thought o' quittin' this business."

"I would, if I were you," contemptuously said the passenger. "You wanted me to submit to those scoundrels without a fight."

"As to that, I didn't think you cared to shoot. You see they generally come out best—"

"When no one resists, I suppose," interrupted the passenger. "This time the Twins were surprised, I guess."

The driver relapsed into silence, and the ride down the mountain was not interrupted again.

On the comparatively level trail, between the foot of the mountain and Sunset, the stage moved along quietly, the horses having recovered from their fright.

The passenger did not resume his seat on the inside, but kept beside the driver, and in due time the vehicle lumbered into the mining-camp.

It pulled up in front of the Winged Lazarus, and the men on the porch saw the single passenger dismount.

He carried nothing in the shape of baggage, but walked toward the hotel, and stepped upon the porch.

His age might have been twenty-five. There was a spirit of extreme youthfulness about him, in spite of his bronzed face, indicative of life in the open air, and his easy but quick gait attracted the attention of the loafers on the porch.

His eyes ran over the crowd in a moment; then he passed into the "office."

Silver Dick, the landlord, always ready, spider-like, for a fly, sprang to the feast and encountered the young man at the end of the counter.

At the same time the voice of the driver of the stage was heard with the toughs on the porch.

"He shoots as quick as a cat jumps," asserted the man of the whip. "Why, sir, he had one o' the Twins on the ground an' the other agin' the gulch wall before you could say Jack Robinson, an' then he mounted the box an' made the team git out o' Dead Woman's Gulch in a jiffy. He's the quickest an' coolest boy I've ever see'd."

This caused many faces to be turned toward the open door, where the newcomer was to be seen in earnest conversation with Silver Dick, and one of the miners rose and went forward.

"I thought so," exclaimed this man, in tones that caused the young passenger to turn and confront him. "You've changed some, Hugh."

The young man looked at the speaker a moment, and then seemed to recognize him.

At any rate, he held out his hand, and the two men stood face to face before the astonished crowd.

The miner pulled the young man called Hugh away from the gaze of the crowd, and they passed straight through the room, and emerged from the hotel by a rear door.

"What brought you here," asked the miner.

"You know, Rube."

"But you're too late, Hugh."

"How, too late? She's here, isn't she?"

"Yes; but—"

"Hang it, man, don't be afraid to tell me the truth. You see I'm no baby."

"I wish you hadn't come to Sunset, hang me if I don't! Of course she's here."

"Where is she? I'll see her at once, though years have passed since we last met."

"Wait."

"Old Raper is still her guardian, I suppose, and he'll welcome me."

"Thar's no Old Raper now. The girl's alone in the world, and—"

"More reason that I should see her! You don't want to tell me the truth. By heavens! I'll find it out from other lips. I'll draw it from the landlord."

"You shall have it from me, Hugh. She's about to become a wife."

"Old Raper's ward?"

"Yes."

"Whose bride is she about to become?"

"The captain's."

"And who's the captain?"

"Captain Flash, our nabob."

"She shall not! I say it, Rube! That girl the wife of a scoundrel like the man who runs Sunset? Never!"

"Wait!" The hand of Rube the miner grew tight on the young man's arm.

"Walls and trees have ears," he urged in low, admonishing tones. "I don't want you to get into trouble. The other one's there now. He's set the hull camp by the ears, an' he's the man who made it possible for you to be held up by the Golden Twins."

"Who is he?"

"They call him Sandy Sam from the coast."

"What sort of man is he?"

"We can't say. He's to be tried yet. He's bound to get mixed up in this affair of Captain Flash an' Effie, an' they'll double bank him an' do him up."

"Not if he's against Captain Flash and his schemes!" cried Hugh. "He'll have one friend in the rough and tumble, and that's Hugh Holloway."

And, breaking from old Rube's grip, the young man turned with defiant mien toward the mountain hotel.

CHAPTER VI.

A FAIR EXILE.

Captain Flash, seated in the room where we saw him last, seemed to be waiting for some one, for he watched the door, and the slightest sound on the street without increased his eagerness.

The person waited for came at last, and the Boss of Sunset was confronted by Centipede, who threw his hat upon the table, and ran his long right hand through the mass of coal-black hair that covered his head.

"They didn't finish him," he remarked.

"What, didn't they meet?"

"They met, took a shot at him, and then backed out."

"The cowards!" hissed the captain. "The Twins don't usually take water."

"But they took it to-night, a hull bucketful," granned the other. "Sandy carried his point, an' ther Twins ar' in the mountains agin', ready ter squeeze some other victim."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the street, not far from Effie's."

The captain started.

"Did you see it, Centipede?"

"Yes; so did Maude."

"What was she doing there?"

"I don't know. I met her on the street, an' we took in the circus."

"What did she think of it?"

Centipede shook his head.

"I can't say. I left her talkin' with him."

The captain nearly sprang from his chair, and his hands shut tightly.

"Not with Sam Sherlock?" he cried.

"With him, that's what! She seemed ter be tellin' him something that I couldn't ketch."

"Why didn't you listen, man?"

"It was an impossibility; I would have been caught at it, an' I don't like the shine of his eyes."

"Pah! This man is a menace to the security of Sunset," averred the boss.

"What fetched him hyar, any how?"

"Time will tell."

"Time, too, may give him a chance ter spoil our game," suggested the yellow man, who proceeded to the window, and there seemed to press his face against the glass.

"You don't think Maude posted him?" asked the captain.

"I—don't—know," was the deliberate reply. "She said it wouldn't be fair ter double bank 'im."

"She did? and to you?"

"To me."

"Do you think she meant it?"

"She generally means what she says, as we both know, eh?"

"Yes; I know; but in taking this man's part the woman is mad. You don't think she told him anything about—about the wedding?"

"Thar's no tellin'," responded Centipede, with a grin. "Let her keep a secret o' that sort, if she kin!"

Captain Flash, silent for a moment, broke out in a volley of expletives directed against both Montana Maude and Sandy Sam, and, at the end of the tirade, sprang from the chair and picked up his silver-braided hat.

"I'm going out. Keep house!" And in another moment Centipede was the room's sole tenant.

The captain's appearance on the street did not attract attention, and he walked almost to the end of it before he halted.

Bursting into a cabin there he heard a slight scream, and a woman arose before him, standing in the lamplight, with her darkish face confronting him, questioningly.

They stood thus but a moment, when, with his hand outstretched, covering her like a revolver, he cried, menacingly.

"You've been bargaining against me; you have turned traitress!"

"It is false!" with blazing eyes.

"You have leagued yourself with the man from the coast."

"I have seen him, I admit," was the reply. "I have even spoken to him. If that be treason, make the most of it!"

She was defiant, and her eyes gazed at him without a particle of fear.

"Having leagued yourself with this man, you are no longer worthy to live in Sunset."

"Do you mean that for a mandate?" was the quick answer. "Do you banish me?"

"We can have no traitors here."

"Very well. I go!"

The captain was astonished at this resolution of the woman.

"I will not be here to-morrow," she went on. "You have banished me from Sunset; the consequences be upon your head, not mine!"

"You have told this man about the marriage. You have entered into a bargain with him."

"For what?"

"To prevent it. You would deprive me of a wife."

Montana Maude smiled.

"Very well," she said. "If the altar is ready to-morrow, lead Effie to it."

"You threaten?"

"It is no threat. If the altar is ready, marry the Windflower of Sunset, that's all."

Flash tried to read the thoughts of the woman, but he failed. Her face was

calmness itself, and her voice did not indicate passion, or anger, or trepidation.

"If you will tell me the truth—"

"There! I am banished! I am an exile. You must not question me now."

"But—"

"Not a word! You would not listen when I offered to talk, but spat out the mandate. Let it go. I will not be here by daylight."

"Just as you like, woman. You strew your own path with thorns, but, remember: the league will not hold together long. We have this spy, this shadow from the coast, in our hands, and he won't rake in a single trick in this game for vengeance."

"For vengeance, is it?" repeated Maude. "Then, you know why he is here."

"I knew it from the very first. I didn't expect him so soon. But, never mind; he is here, as cool as ever, but victory will not be his long."

"You may fail. You may meet your match in Sandy Sherlock."

"With all Sunset against him?" laughed Flash. "Why, woman, you know better! I can lift my hand, and the whole camp will fall upon him like an avalanche, and grind him to powder. Our match? This shadower from the west? Bah!"

Maude made no reply to these hot words.

"Good-by," from Captain Flash.

"Good-by!" and the hand of Montana Maude was held out and taken.

"You must not play a game against me and my plans," he repeated.

"I will not play a hand against the happiness of Effie."

"See that you don't; for to interfere with Captain Flash is death."

He passed out, and the woman listened to his steps until they died away in the street beyond. Then she sprang to the couch against the rough wall.

Running one hand underneath the pillow she drew out a revolver.

"No! I won't do anything against the happiness of Effie, my charge since old Raper died," she muttered. "Since the captain has seen fit to banish me, and his word backed, as he only can back it, is law in Sunset. I am from this moment an exile and spotted."

She opened the door, and looked out, then, seeing no one, she stepped back and began to go through a few trinkets, which she took from a little box, deftly sunk into the wall.

This took her some little time, when, with the revolver hid on her person, she passed from the shanty, shutting the door carefully behind her and locking it.

In the shadow of the cabin she paused and looked at the structure. Her face had lost all color, and her lips were glued together resolutely.

She walked away, but soon stopped at a door which she found closed.

Some time had passed since Sam Sherlock's interview with Effie, and everything seemed in repose around the cabin. She opened the door and glided in.

The moonlight falling into the place through the window beside the narrow door, touched the face of a sleeping girl on a low couch, and Maude bent over it.

"To-morrow," she murmured. "To-morrow it will be life or death, grief or joy for her. Shall I break her dreams now? She trusts me. She has been persuaded by me to accept this terrible fate. I can save her. The hills can hide us. The mountains out yonder will bury us and save her."

The hand of Maude seemed about to touch the girl's shoulder when she started at a sound at the door.

With the quickness of the tigress she sprang to the door, threw it open as, with the other hand, she drew the revolver.

Some one outside fell back but Montana Maude was upon him in an instant.

"You?" she cried. "He set you after me, did he?"

There was no reply, but the face of Centipede became impassive.

"We won't disturb her," Maude went on, glancing back at the half-open door. "Come! He told you to watch her, perhaps. Tell him that you found me here taking leave of the Windflower, and say, too, that he will hear from Montana Maude in the near future."

She pushed the little man away, and Centipede went across the street, muttering: "Curse the vixen!"

Montana Maude, not re-entering the house, gently closed the door; then she quite noiselessly walked away, her hand clasping the silver-mounted six-shooter.

But she had not proceeded far when she paused to gaze at a dark figure that seemed to lean against a shanty in a strange attitude. The pose was unnatural, and, after a moment's inspection, the exile went toward it.

"It's Robinet, the man who came up from Santa Fe last summer," she cried. Her hand touched the body, which, at the slight pressure, fell to the ground.

"My God! This new mystery will set all Sunset on nettles," she gasped.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOUNTAIN ENCOUNTER.

If Montana Maude had not encountered Captain Flash in the somewhat exciting manner just described, but had turned her attention to Sam Sherlock, the Man of Sand, she would have seen the strange sport who had invaded Sunset so unexpectedly take as sudden leave of the camp.

Sandy Sam glided from the place, and, well mounted, took to the mountains, thus missing Hugh Holloway, who came in on the stage.

He followed a well-defined trail until he reached a rough-looking part of the country, where he reined in his steed.

It was not far from the break of another day; in fact, the arrows of light were already beginning to illumine the East, and for some time the shadow sport looked around him with evident curiosity.

At last he seemed to be satisfied that he had reached a certain location, for he rode on a little further, and leaning from his saddle, thrust his hand up into the fork of a tree.

The hand vanished, and the next moment Sandy Sam drew from a hole in the tree a flat packet.

It looked like a letter, though it seemed to have more bulk than a mere communication, and a smile appeared on the sport's face as he began to untwist the string that held on the covering.

All at once the air was shaken by the sound of laughter, and the sport looked up.

He was not able to locate the sound just right, but it seemed to grate familiarly on his ears, for he listened, with a broader smile on his countenance.

"So soon?" he said to himself. "I did not look for it."

Quietly slipping the packet into an inner pocket, as if it would stand examination at some future time, the shadow sport urged his horse forward, but, at last, finding the trail very narrow, he dismounted, and went forward on foot.

Day had broken now, and the sport could see the surroundings.

When he stopped again he drew a pair of revolvers, and leaned forward, parting some bushes with one of his weapons.

The sight that met his gaze must have startled him, for his eyes dilated, and he looked on in silence.

Sandy Sam looked back at the horse, which had stopped, willing to wait for him at a bend of the trail, and stepped boldly forward.

"Hello, pard," cried a voice. "We didn't expect ter meet yer here; but you see it's the unexpected what happens, even in these parts."

Standing on a little piece of hard, flinty ground, and near the head of a prostrate horse, were the Golden Twins—Taos and Tophet, of unsavory reputation.

Their hands were fastened to their sides by cords, and the same kind of bonds also secured their lower limbs.

Thus secured, they were harmless for evil, and the Shadow Sport advanced with the revolvers threateningly in his hands.

"You've fallen among thieves, have you?" he asked.

"Among the veritable Philistines of the hills!" grinned Tophet.

"Never saw anything like it," put in Taos, his face all agrin as he spoke. "You see, Captain Sam, we're in bad luck. In the first place, you order us out o' Sunset, an' we oblige you, because you have the shootin' eye."

"You might have tried me," was the answer.

"We didn't keer ter. The eye war enough."

The Shadow Sport looked down at his revolvers, and then into the bronzed faces of the twins before him.

"I have you at my mercy, gentlemen," said he, half carelessly fingering the six-shooters. "I have a mind to leave you here food for the scavengers of the mountain. You would have killed me in Sunset, if you had got a chance."

"By my soul, no!" cried Taos. "It was a bluff, nothin' else, Captain Sam. We thought you understood it all along. We aren't half as black as they paint us. They call us the stranglers of the hills, but our hands never strangled any one. We run against the wrong man a while ago—run slap agin' em, an' hyar we ar', tied like lambs for the slaughter."

"You don't look much like a brace of lambs."

"More like a pair o' wolves, eh?" grinned Tophet, the most humorous of the pair.

"Wolves you are," replied Shadow Sam, with no show of leniency in his tones.

"What you doin' hyar?" asked Taos. "Lookin' for the Twins?"

"Not exactly. Who tied you?"

"Ask the band o' cut-throats down the mountain. We were just movin' 'long peaceably when all at once they pounced upon us an' held us at the muzzle o' their shootin' irons. That's one of their horses yonder. It wasn't killed by us. A half tenderfoot in the gang let his revolver go off, an' the hoss was in the way. We don't shed blood. It's agin' our nature. We was raised on angel food an' grew a little off color. Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you haven't always been angels," said Sandy Sam. "You remember that you found an old man in the mountains once and carried him into Sunset?"

Taos and Tophet exchanged hasty glances.

"That war old Raper, the miner—the Man o' Mystery, as they called him down thar."

"Yes; you brought him into Sunset on your shoulders."

"An' stayed till after they planted him."

"You searched the body, didn't you?"

"We did. We couldn't resist that temptation, Sandy Sam. You know what they told about the old man?"

"The story of his belief is not a new one," was the sport's answer. "Did you find the chart on the body?"

Both men shook their heads with emphasis.

"I want the truth!" cried Sandy Sam, his voice suddenly becoming stern and harsh.

"You shall have all you want."

"You can't deceive Sam Sherlock and live."

"That's encouragin'," grinned Tophet. "See hyar; these ropes ar' rayther cuttin' in their way, an' my arms ache."

Sandy Sam did not make a move toward releasing the Twins, but seemed to plant himself all the more firmly on the flinty stones about him.

"What became of the chart?" he demanded.

"We don't know. Now shoot if you think that a lie."

Both men straightened, as if for the fatal bullets, but the hands of Sandy Sam did not lift.

"You did not inquire into the death of Raper Donalds?" he said.

"We found the body, an', knowin' whose it war, we concluded they would like ter hear the news in Sunset."

"Was there a trail leading from the spot where you found it?"

"Thar war."

Tophet tried to lift his hand, seeing which, the Shadow Sport suddenly stepped forward, and, by a dexterous movement of his knife, cut the prisoners' bonds.

"That's human," ejaculated Taos, as he shook off the last remnants of the cords. "We owe you one for that, Sandy Sam. Yes! Thar war a trail."

"Which way did it lead?"

"Toward Sunset."

"In the direction of the camp, you say?"

"In no other direction. We saw it for mor'n a mile, but we didn't pay much attention ter it."

"How far are we from the spot where you found Old Raper of Sunset?"

"It's just around the big ledge over thar. Didn't think you war so close, eh?"

"I hardly thought so. We will go and see."

The Twins stepped forward and walked ahead of the shadow sport, watched eagerly by him as they shuffled over the ground.

"Hyar's the very spot," said Tophet, as he halted and pointed at the ground at his feet. "The old man lay agin' that boulder, an' we came up an' fell back, as if we had run afoul o' a nest of rattlers. You kin see a darkish stain on the rock. Thar's whar the head rested."

Sandy Sam bent forward and noticed the stain.

"The marks of a boot went down that trail," continued Tophet, pointing over the ground.

"But it's not there now, of course; no; the recent rains have washed it out."

Tophet moved forward, and then raised his hand.

Taos sprang after him, and the Shadow Sport saw the pair put their hands together.

"It beats my time all holler," cried Tophet, as he glanced up at Sam.

"What does?"

"That!"

The dark finger of the Twin was designating a certain spot of ground, and his companion was gazing at it as if a diamond marked the place.

Sandy Sam stopped beside the men and centred his own eyes on the ground, while an exclamation fell from his lips.

"I've heard of such things afore, but I allus understood that the marks had ter be made long ago, when the world war young. That's what the college-bred pard told us last summer in the Taos Hills; but look at that."

The Shadow Sport saw in the hard earth at his feet a well-defined foottrack, apparently made while the soil was soft, though it now was like a stone.

"It's curious, eh?" said Taos.

Sandy Sam did not reply, but stooped and gave the startling discovery a closer examination.

"It ain't the shoetrack of one o' them antideelvians, is it?" queried the mystified Taos.

"Hardly," said Shadow Sam. "You saw it after finding Old Raper's body here, did you?"

"Can't say that we did, but the tracks led this way."

The sport seemed satisfied, for he took a little cord from his pocket and measured the foottrack half a dozen ways, keeping the dimensions in his head.

During these actions the Golden Twins glanced significantly at one another, but did not interrupt the sport.

At last Sandy Sam arose.

He still looked at the footprint, and seemed to study it with even more curiosity than he had yet evinced.

"Now," said he, turning abruptly upon the silent Twins. "You two men are free."

"Free," cried they, in the same breath. "You don't want ter search us, then?"

"For what?"

"For ther chart you mentioned awhile back. It would be useless, however, for we didn't find it on Old Raper, though some of the pards of Sunset regarded us with suspicion all the time we war down thar. You might ask the man who made that track in the mud."

Sandy Sam smiled and led the way back.

"We can't be friends. You men know that," he remarked, as he halted beside his horse, and turned his face upon the Golden Twins. "I can't befriend you many more times."

Taos and Tophet seemed to get a fierce light in their eyes.

"That's a fact. You can't become our friend, and, what is more, we don't expect it."

Sam mounted and picked up the reins. "Just keep out of range," he said.

"You've done me a favor to-day, but other debts must be paid."

"Then keep out of our range, too," cried Taos, suddenly lifting his hand. "We ar' the Twins o' Camp Satan—the Strangling Angels o' Montana. We haven't been lied on but once, an' that war when they accused us o' killin' Raper Donalds. It's iron, not silk, between us, Sandy Sam. Your mission is not altogether unknown to us. We knew you the moment we saw you in Sunset, but discretion warned us ter obey your commands."

The hands of the Twins were lifted to their hatbrims by way of salute, and in another second both had turned their backs once more upon Sandy Sam.

"It's the vital clew, perhaps," muttered the shadow sport, as he rode back toward Sunset.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEARDED IN HIS DEN.

Already in Sunset there was new excitement, and the camp in the silver range was at fever heat.

The startling discovery made by Montana Maude had become known to all, and the denizens of Sunset had gathered around and gazed into the face of Robinet, the dead man.

Robinet had been helped out of the world, as all could see at a glance, for a bullet hole was found in his left breast, but the signs of a struggle were absent.

The body had been carried from the spot where Maud found it, and placed on the dead man's cot in his shanty.

No one had heard the revolver shot, but the burned garments of the victim told that the weapon had been placed close to him, and thus the shot had in a measure been stifled.

Robinet was no man of mystery.

All Sunset knew him, inoffensive, and one who attended strictly to his own affairs.

He had come up from Santa Fe, some said at least, and his mild manners had made him a general favorite.

Indignation ruled the hour while the camp discussed the murder, and the dark faces of the miners of Sunset grew darker still as hands were shut and lips muttered vengeance.

In his house behind the young pines sat Captain Flash.

As before, he was waiting for some one, and that person came in without any formal announcement.

Centipede, showing his yellowish face and deep black eyes which glittered, advanced and leaned over the table.

"What's the latest?" asked Captain Flash.

"Nothin'. They're ready for the job when they find the man what killed Robinet."

"Why don't they find him?"

"They want a little proof."

"Why, where is he?"

"He's gone."

"Isn't that proof?" cried the nabob of Sunset. "What more do they want? He must have had a grudge against the man from Santa Fe. An old feud perhaps."

"I can't say, cap'n," replied Centipede.

"The new stranger seems ter take an interest in the murder."

"What, is there a new arrival in camp?"

"Yes, the young man what came in on the stage what ther Twins held up in Dead Woman's Gulch."

Captain Flash became more and more interested and he started forward.

"Tell me about this passenger," cried he. "He is young, you say?"

"Quite so. Jehu says he's the coolest mortal he ever seed. He showed fight from the start, an' sent Taos down in the road with a bullet in his head."

"Killed one on the Twins, did he?"

"Dropped 'em in his tracks and drove Tophet agin' the wall as he druv the stage past. He's chained lightnin', says Jehu."

"Did you see him, Centipede?"

"Yes."

"Got a good look, eh?"

"Stood within five feet of him."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"Never."

"What does he call himself?"

"Hugh Holloway."

"I never heard the name before," said Captain Flash reflectively.

"He doesn't look much like a tender-foot, but, at the same time, he hasn't the ear marks of a tough."

"You see it all, Centipede," smiled the nabob of Sunset. "So we have a new-comer."

"An' he's just in time, eh, cap'n?"

Captain Flash pulled for a moment at his mustache and then replied:

"There are to be no witnesses," Maud even won't be there."

Centipede looked at his master, but did not speak.

"What do they say about Sandy Sam's absence?" queried Captain Flash.

"They don't say much about it. Fact is, cap'n, they don't seem ter have missed 'im."

"But they must miss him. They must know that this man who drove the Twins away has sneaked away from Sunset and probably after Robinet got his dose."

"I see," said the yellow man, drawing back. "You want 'em ter know it, eh?"

"I do. They must know of his absence, and they'll put this and that together, don't you see?"

"I see. It's a great scheme."

"Go out and circulate the news," continued the master of the Montana camp. "Robinet was a man with many friends, and his death will stir up the whole camp."

"It's reached that point now, cap'n."

"So much the better. Sandy Sam may come back, but it's not likely to be that way to-day. Maude does not say much, does she?"

"Maude is not in Sunset."

"Gone, too?" exclaimed Captain Flash.

"Well, Maude was giving me a little trouble. You remember you saw her talking to Sandy Sam? It looks like a conspiracy."

Centipede withdrew, but at the door he stopped and looked back at Captain Flash.

"Shall I be here by ten o'clock?" he asked significantly.

"Yes."

"Thar'll be no failure, cap'n?"

"When did I fail? The girl is ready for the bridal now, and she will be here."

"An' the parson?"

"I've arranged that, too. The bride was to have been given away by Maude, but we can dispense with that part of the ceremony. Come back by ten, but mind you, Centipede, play out your hand well; let them know that Sandy Sam Sherlock left Sunset after midnight last night. It's important."

Once more Captain Flash found himself alone in the room behind the trees, and springing up he opened a secret niche in the wall and drew forth a pocket-book which he carried over to the table.

His face showed his eagerness and triumph as he opened the pocket-book and tumbled its contents before him.

These consisted for the most part of papers, some dark with age and well worn, and he separated them with his long fingers.

All at once he picked up one tied with a yellow string and opened it.

A bit of parchment fell out on the table and Captain Flash held it before him.

The parchment was covered with a lot of lines which crossed each other in an inexplicable manner, and here and there were figures and crosses.

The importance of the little object was shown by the captain's face, and he handled it carefully as he inspected it in the full light of day.

"They don't beat Captain Flash of Sunset," he chuckled to himself in a tone almost audible. "They don't know where this is, and what is more, they'll never find out."

After a while he replaced the things in the pocketbook and restored it to the niche in the wall.

For some time he watched the door, but no one came in.

He was quite alone, and now and then he glanced at the window, from which he could look down between the pines that bordered the walk and thence into the street.

Suddenly he caught sight of a figure in the walk, and in an instant he was on his feet and at the window.

"That must be the new comer," he said. "Hugh Holloway is going to pay me a visit."

The young man who had come in on the last stage came on and knocked.

Captain Flash, darting a quick glance toward the hidden niche, opened the portal and admitted his visitor.

Holloway came in and was shown to a chair near the table, but the young man did not take it.

"Captain Flash, I believe?" he said, looking at the master-spirit of Sunset.

"That's my name. To whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"I am Hugh Holloway. I came in on the stage last night."

"Oho, you're the gentleman who dropped one of the road agents in Dead Woman's Gulch?"

"We were stopped by the famous Golden Twins, and I let one of the pair have it on a hasty trigger."

"With deadly effect, according to Jehu's story," said Captain Flash. "You will now have the other at your heels."

"Perhaps," with a fearless smile. "He may give me a little trouble, but whenever he cares to meet Hugh Holloway he shall be accommodated in any manner that suits him best."

Captain Flash looked the young man over from head to foot and seemed to make a mental note of his observation.

Hugh Holloway stood six feet in his boots, and his frame was that of the athlete's, and Captain Flash must have admired the young Samson.

"Captain Flash, I have called on you for a purpose," continued the young stranger. "It is a delicate matter, but it must be attended to like any other."

Captain Flash waved his hand and bade the youth go on.

"It is reported that to-day is to be your wedding day—that you are to make a young girl your wife at a certain hour."

"They know that in camp, do they?" laughed the nabob. "Well, it's impossible to keep anything of that nature, I suppose."

"It is true, then?"

The very eagerness of the speaker betrayed him and further excited Captain Flash.

"Does this matter so close to my heart concern you, Mr. Holloway?" he inquired.

"It does—more than you think."

"In what way, pray?"

"The young lady is my betrothed!"

If a thunderbolt had fallen on the floor at Captain Flash's feet he would have started less.

Falling back in his chair, he gazed at Hugh Holloway with an evil flash.

"Come! this is carrying the play a little too far," he cried. "I recognize no betrothals but my own, and no man shall interfere with my affairs."

The young man flushed.

"The young lady was betrothed to me by her guardian and with her consent, though she was but a child at the time."

"She never mentioned you, Mr. Holloway."

"Perhaps not. It was years ago, as I have said. After the betrothal the pair went away and I have tried to locate them without success till lately."

"It is too late now," coolly said Captain Flash. "The die is cast and you have reached Sunset just in time to witness the ceremony that unites Captain Flash and Effie Donalds."

Hugh Holloway seemed to recoil, and blood left his cheeks, but in a moment he had partially mastered himself.

"You will not respect the prior engagement?" he exclaimed. "You will persist in making my love your wife?"

"Aye, if a thousand childhood betrothals confronted me!" was the answer. "I know no former engagements. I know no Hugh Holloway in this matter. I shall become the husband of Effie, the Windflower of Sunset, at the appointed hour."

"If you can!"

It was a challenge which was not to be misunderstood and it brought Captain Flash to his feet.

"This is Sunset!" he thundered.

"This is the home of the Czar of Montana, and woe to the man or men who interfere with the love affairs of—"

"Of Kiddled Eric, eh?" interrupted Hugh Holloway.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RETURN OF SANDY SAM.

Kiddled Eric!

That was the name which Sandy Sam had spoken on two occasions, and now it had fallen from the young man's tongue.

Why had he applied it to Captain Flash?

The Czar of Sunset did not start when this name was pronounced, but looked coolly at his visitor and seemed to regard him as one barely responsible for his utterances.

"You have heard of me," repeated Captain Flash. "The ceremony will take place at the appointed hour, and woe to the man who interferes."

"Good-morning."

That was all.

Captain Flash turned to the table and began to look over some documents which he took from a drawer.

"One word," said Hugh.

"Not here—not with you."

"One word—two—five—ten, I say," and the young man leaned forward, striking the table with his hand. "You shall listen to me, Captain Flash. You may be Czar of Sunset, a name which you have taken upon yourself and it may fit you well; but you shall listen to Hugh Holloway."

"Go on."

Captain Flash looked up, and a faint smile crossed his face.

He seemed to think that he held the best hand, and that the young man was in a trap of his own setting.

Holloway stepped back, his hand falling from the table, but his eyes regarding the nabob of the mountain camp with intense eagerness.

It was evident that the man who had spun Taos around like a top in the heart of Dead Woman's Gulch did not fear the master spirit of Sunset.

"The betrothal of years ago is binding still," he said, deliberately. "She considers it so and so do I!"

"You've seen her, then?"

"I have."

"And she told you that she considers that foolish bond binding now, as then?"

"She has told me so of her own free will."

"It's false! Moreover, she is to be—"

come my wife within the next few hours—"

"She is not, sir!"

Captain Flash swallowed hard, and his hand pointed toward the door.

"Go! We will meet on other ground bye and bye, but not till after the ceremony!" he cried.

"Before or never."

"Then have it your own way," and the nabob was on his feet facing Holloway with the ire of a mountain lion.

"That suits me," exclaimed Holloway.

"We are alone in the house, are we?"

"Entirely alone."

"Then let us have it out here—in this room."

"It shall be thus. You see I am accommodating. You came to Sunset for a fight and you shall not be disappointed."

Captain Flash coolly and with deliberation drew a revolver and glanced once at it, as the light fell upon the weapon.

"You want it to be revolvers, I suppose. They tell me you shoot well at all times, especially after dark."

"You could not have chosen a better weapon—for me," smiled Holloway.

The young man quietly drew his own six-shooter and stepped back. The man at the table did not move, but straightened there and looked coolly at his antagonist.

Face to face within the four walls of the chamber the two men stood silent after Holloway's last speech.

"What shall the signal be?" asked Captain Flash.

Out in the trees a bird now and then sent forth a peculiar cry, and as the nabob spoke the call came in.

"Let it be the next cry of the bird out there," said Holloway.

"Agreed—the next cry!"

They waited on with their hands at the trigger and the light wind of morning stirring the branches of the pines in the yard.

But the cry did not come.

Instead footsteps came swift to the door and it opened to let the little shape of Centipede in upon the startling tableau.

The yellow man stopped with a cry and gazed speechless from his master to Holloway and back again.

Both men noticed him and both saw that he had something to impart.

"What is it, Centipede?" asked Captain Flash.

"He's come back."

"Who?"

"The man from the coast."

"Well?"

"They are about to take him for the murder of Robinet."

A look of joy lit up the dark eyes of the Czar of Sunset, but Holloway put in suddenly:

"Your work, eh, captan?" said he.

"How mine?"

"Your work," accusingly retorted Holloway. "Let your man stand over there while we come back to the business in hand."

Centipede understood, but instead of stepping back he came closer to Holloway and all at once threw himself forward.

Holloway was borne to the wall before he could use hand or weapon, and in another moment he fell to the floor, half stunned by a blow from the yellow hand underneath the jaw.

"Well done, Centipede!" exclaimed Captain Flash. "I couldn't have done better myself. Now to the trap."

Holloway, unable to resist, was dragged across the floor and out of the room.

Centipede seemed to possess the strength of a Samson, for he quickly vanished with his prey, and Captain Flash awaited his return.

"He's in the trap now," said the yellow man, coming back into the room and laying one of Holloway's revolvers upon the table. "They have him almost in their power. I started the ball to rolling and it gathered moss all the time,

ha, ha! By the time he rode into Sunset it was ready and the moment he appeared they began to shake their heads. Golddust George is at their head. He's a beaut, captain."

"The very man I would have head the mob!" cried Captain Flash. "It couldn't be in better hands."

"I fixed George," responded Centipede. "By this time they have Sandy Sam in the toils—"

"Go out and make sure of it. And if you see Maude—"

"Montana Maude is not in Sunset," broke in the man with the Malay-like face. "She was seen to turn her face toward the mountains."

"I banished her. I sent her away."

"Because she made common cause with the man from the coast?"

"Yes. We want no traitresses in Sunset. She did not take the girl along?"

"She would have been tracked if she had!" exclaimed Centipede, and in another moment he was at the window.

"Here they come!" he cried.

Captain Flash went over to him and looked down the walk between the pines.

Three stalwart men were seen approaching the house, and for several seconds Captain Flash gazed at them in silence.

"The head man's George himself," muttered Centipede. "It's all right, cap'n. They've got him under their hands."

The three were admitted at once, and the master spirit of Sunset went back to his chair.

"The man known as Sandy Sam has come back to Sunset," said the spokesman for the trio. "He is accused of murdering Robinet. As yet he has not been arrested. We can take him at any time, but we thought that perhaps you didn't want any more excitement before the marriage. Sandy Sam is now at the Winged Lazarus. The man can't escape, but he may resist the arrest."

"Has he seen the body?" asked Captain Flash.

"Yes, he viewed it at the shanty. He said nothing, asked no questions, merely looked and walked away."

"That's proof of guilt," put in Centipede. "Down with the murderer from the coast!"

Captain Flash looked coolly at his watch and seemed to reflect a moment.

It was eight o'clock.

In two hours his marriage with Effie the Wind-flower would take place.

In the brief space of time occupied by the glance at his watch he seemed to make a decision, for looking once more at the three stalwart men he said:

"Take him, but mind you, boys, don't let him use his revolvers."

Golddust George touched his hat-brim and backed away.

"Shall I help?" asked Centipede.

"You'll not be needed when Golddust has the matter in charge. He will see that it is well done. He is high-sheriff of Sunset, by my power, and he knows what to do."

Once more the door opened and the trio filed out, their broad shoulders rising and falling as they walked between the pines till they reached the street beyond.

"It's a clever job, eh?" cried Centipede, striking the table with his hand.

"One in the old trap and the other nearly in the toils. We are the same invincible two-of-a-kind as ever, captain, and when we go back to the Land o' the Mad Lariats we will be supreme."

"Hush," thundered Captain Flash. "No mention of that region here. We are facing the present and the future will take care of itself. In two hours the game will have been won and the prize will be in my hands."

"And the treasure of the old miners ours at last!"

The look that darted from the eyes of Captain Flash silenced Centipede, and that worthy slid away abashed.

"I would like to see Golddust and

his pards corral Sandy Sam," pleaded the yellow man.

"Then go, but, mind you, keep out of the way of his revolvers if Golddust and his men should make a blunder."

"Never mind that, cap'n," was the response. "When did Centipede stop a bullet?" and laughing till his eyes danced the bundle of wickedness and agility vanished.

Centipede quickened his steps and reached the street beyond the trees, but could see nothing of Golddust George and his pards.

The trio had vanished, but he did not doubt that he would find them all at the Winged Lazarus.

His face betrayed his eagerness, and he glided forward with the intention of assisting in the arrest of Sandy Sam, for, always ready for a fray, he would not be able to keep out of the one promised.

Golddust George and his companions were followed by a number of men from the moment they reappeared on the street, as if Sunset knew the import of their mission to Captain Flash's house.

The trio headed for the hotel and gained the porch when the tall figure of the man from the coast made its appearance in the open door.

In an instant all hands stopped, as Sandy Sam surveyed the vigilantes and then seemed to await their business.

Golddust George at the foot of the porch sent a hand swiftly toward his hip as he said in a loud voice:

"I've an order for your arrest, Sandy Sam."

Sam Sherlock smiled and appeared to draw his figure to its true height as he looked again over the assembling mob.

It was life or death and that in a brief space.

"An order for my arrest?" he said, addressing Golddust George. "What is the accusation?"

"The murder of Robinet of Santa Fe."

The accused stepped nearer the edge of the porch and said coolly to the toughs assembled there:

"This is your master's work. This is the last card Captain Flash deigns to play. It becomes the man who pretends to rule Sunset, treating you like a lot of serfs. You should be men when you are slaves. You should be eagles when you are caws; but, bound hand and foot and hoodwinked by the machinations of Captain Flash, called elsewhere Kiddled Eric, you ought to assert your freedom. I am here. Arrest me!"

Not a man moved, only Golddust George glanced at his companions, and in the silence they might have heard one another breathe.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH CENTIPEDE MEETS HIS MATCH.

Sandy Sam did not dread a meeting with the men of Sunset, as his calm demeanor proved, for he stood face to face with the mob on the porch of the Winged Lazarus.

Golddust George and his companions backing up the mandate of the Czar of the Montana camp, stood shoulder to shoulder, but the coolness of the man on the porch had dampened their ardor.

Who would make the first move?

A short distance from this scene stood Centipede, taking it all in half breathless and ardent.

Inwardly he cursed the high-sheriff of Sunset as he faced the victim with his posse, but at the same time he did nothing to egg on the assault.

"You want me," said Sam at last. "I am here."

It was a challenge as well as a defiance, but the crowd did not advance.

Suddenly Centipede moved, and his hand went up as he cried out:

"Ar' you cowards, pards o' Sunset? Take your man, dead or alive!"

Some turned to look at the little man standing now in full relief, but the words infused new vigor into the mob.

Golddust George stepped toward the

porch, and his dark hand seemed to get a firmer grasp on the six-shooter there.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," he cried.

Sandy Sam appeared to lean toward the speaker, and the crowd heard him say coolly:

"On whose authority?"

"I am high-sheriff. I am the head constable here."

"Whom do you serve?—Captain Flash or Kidded Eric?"

"We serve no master," haughtily answered Golddust George.

"Slaves in the deepest sense of the term," cried Sandy Sam. "I see it all. I am under arrest, I suppose. Where is my accuser?"

"He will come forward in time."

The sport from Frisco folded his arms and drew his figure to its real attitude.

"Bring him here," he said.

Golddust turned to the men at his back and looked them over.

"Bring forward the man who says I killed Robinet?"

"Thar he is!"

Some one had turned and a finger was covering Centipede.

The little man with the yellow face started and would have hastened away if a voice had not stopped him.

Called upon, he bit his lips and turned around, then walked toward the crowd.

"Come here, Centipede," cried Golddust George. "You have charged this man with the death of Robinet."

"I?"

"You. Don't deny it."

"But, Golddust George, this is not an organized court—"

"It is court enough for you to answer the questions he has a right to put to you."

Centipede wanted to get out of the muddle, but all eyes were fixed upon him, and he was in the toils.

"Stand before him there and answer the question," continued Golddust. "You still accuse him?"

The eyes of Sandy Sam were fastened upon the man with the yellow skin who had been pushed forward and now stood between the mob and the porch.

Sandy Sam had stepped to the edge of the porch and could have touched Centipede with his hand.

"So you are the witness against me?" he said.

Centipede recoiled.

"You are the witness selected to put the noose around my neck? You are the perjured rascal of Sunset!"

Centipede seemed to gasp, and his face lost some of its sickly hue.

"Out with it," almost thundered the Shadow Sport. "Out with your accusation. Tell them what you know about my killing Robinet. Tell the solemn truth for once, Ananias."

Centipede backed off, but the hand of Golddust George pushed him forward again.

"Tell it," said the high-sheriff.

Centipede braced up.

"I saw that man last night," said he.

"You saw me? Where?"

"On the street, not far from the spot where Montana Maude found Robinet."

"Well?"

"You was sneaking down the street, leadin' yer hoss."

"Go on."

"I saw you stop near the shanty with the big rock at the door."

"Playing spy, eh?"

"I couldn't help it," and Centipede turned for a moment upon the crowd. "I follered him, Golddust. You know why, perhaps. I saw him stop in front o' the shanty with the big rock at the door. I saw a man come out the moment he stopped. It war Robinet."

All eyes were fastened upon Sandy Sam.

"Don't stop," he said to the witness. "Go on and tell all you saw, but nothing else."

"I saw him meet Robinet. They talked together a little while and then both walked away."

"And you went back? You're a good spy, upon my soul!"

"I had seen enough for the time," said Centipede. "He must have been the last man seen with Robinet."

"The last one but yourself, perhaps."

Captain Flash's spy started, and his face got ghastly.

"Turn about is fair play," said some one in the crowd with an audible chuckle. "He's turnin' the tables on Centipede, an' the little man will have ter prove an alibi himself or—"

"It is false," broke in Centipede. "What would I want ter kill Robinet for?"

"Ask your master," exclaimed Sandy Sam. "Go and ask Captain Flash, nabob and czar."

"It's a charge agin' the cap'n," said Centipede, appealing to the mob. "It's an insult ter ther man who has built up Sunset, makin' it the boss camp in Montana. Will you men stand this?"

"Down with the man from the coast! Down with the slayer of Robinet!"

The exclamations rose higher and higher, and Sandy Sam looked down into the faces before him and kept silence.

"That's it," growled Centipede. "It's for the honor o' Sunset. The old camp mustn't be the abode o' murderers like the man who killed Robinet!"

"Then take that yellow serpent out and strangle him," put in the Shadow Sport.

"I never did it!" protested Centipede.

"You will find me here whenever I am wanted for trial," continued Sam. "You will find me the guest of the Winged Lazarus, for I shall not quit Sunset till the hand that slew Robinet of Santa Fe is powerless to repeat the crime."

Sandy Sam leaned against the post of the porch and quietly regarded the crowd. Golddust George was perplexed.

The men behind him were restless, and the outcome of the scene was not gratifying.

While they wanted a victim, they did not see their way clear to take Sandy Sam by force after his counter accusation.

It was a deep dilemma for Sunset, and the toughs of the silver camp did not know what to do.

"He'll escape if you let him go," whispered Centipede to the high-sheriff.

"He accuses you, Centipede."

"But it's false—a lie to get him out of the trap! He killed Robinet."

"We can't take 'im just on your testimony."

Centipede gasped.

"You can't, eh?"

"No."

"Think o' the ceremony."

"I do."

"It will take place in an hour, an' with that man loose in Sunset startling things may happen."

Golddust George backed off, and from a few feet distant said to the Shadow Sport:

"You will be called upon to prove your innocence, if you can, and that within a short time."

"You will find me here."

The mob turned, some of them reluctantly, but Centipede with a scowl on his face clutched the high-sheriff's arm.

"He bluffed you," growled the yellow man. "You let this fakir from the coast beat you right out."

"Silence," cried Golddust George, looking down at the speaker with a withering eye. "You should be the last man to accuse me of treachery to Captain Flash. He called you a murderer to your face and before the pards of Sunset, and you never lifted a hand against him."

"But I faced him with a denial."

"Words not hands!" hissed George. "Time may come for you to prove an alibi, Captain Centipede."

The little man slunk away and Golddust George looked after him with a meanful smile at his lips.

Several minutes later Centipede might

have been seen at the door of Effie's house, and for a second he stood there with his ear close to the portal.

Not a sound came to his ears and he listened a few moments, or until his patience oozed out at his fingers' ends.

All at once he put his face to the little window and looked into the house.

The warm sunlight threw its pleasantness into the place, and revealed the remotest corner.

The greedy eyes of Centipede sought out the corner where the girl's couch stood, and he smiled when he saw the outlines of a figure upon it.

But the next moment he uttered a cry and his eyes dilated.

"She lies in a strange position," said he. "What if the Windflower is dead?"

Centipede sprang to the door, which he found unlocked, and in a second he opened it.

Stepping cautiously into the place, he glided forward and made his way to the couch.

The figure fascinated him in a strange manner, but in a little while the truth was discovered.

Centipede gave utterance to a gasp as he lifted a bit of bedclothes from the head of the figure.

"She is gone!" cried he.

Centipede fell back almost to the door, his eyes excited and his whole mien one of terror.

"The bride's run off!" he gasped. "What will the cap'n say now?"

The yellow man saw that what he had seen from the window was but a well-arranged dummy, and that the beauty of Sunset was not in the house at all.

"How can I carry the news to the cap'n?" he asked himself. "What will he say to me and how will he act? I can't do it. I'll run off myself first."

Centipede looked around the place and saw that the flight had been well planned.

Everything had been arranged so as to deceive those who might come to the window, and the figure on the couch was as perfect a dummy as Sunset had ever seen.

Five minutes elapsed before Centipede quitted the house, and then he glided away with the agility of his cunning race.

He did not turn his face toward the house behind the pines, but entered the main drink resort of Sunset and imbibed of the strongest stuff on sale there, after which, with his nerves artificially strengthened, he slipped out.

In the sunlight he glanced at a small watch which he dragged from beneath his sash.

"It's the bridal hour, lackin' ten minutes!" he exclaimed, and then he glanced toward Captain Flash's domicile.

"Let 'im find it out for himself," he muttered. "The nest is empty and the enemy is still in Sunset!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN IN THE PIT.

There was at least one person in Sunset who was interested in the welfare of Hugh Holloway, the hero of the hold-up in Dead Woman's Gulch, and this was the man called Rube.

Rube Ransom, a miner of many years and a man of undoubted courage and quick perception, was, as we have seen, the first person to recognize Holloway when he appeared to the loafers on the Winged Lazarus' porch after the arrival of the stage.

It was Ransom who broke the news of Captain Flash's coming marriage and named the bride-to-be, the young girl who turned out to be the friend and companion of his boyhood and his youthful fiancée.

In vain did the old miner protest against a visit to Captain Flash's; in vain did he tell the impetuous youth that such a call might result disastrously to himself; Holloway was determined to beard the lion in his den, which he did, as we have seen.

Rube waited for some time for Hugh's

coming, but, as the young man did not make his appearance, he became suspicious and said things to himself, while he shook his head.

He snuffed foul play, knowing the character of both Captain Flash and Centipede, and after the defeat of the sheriff's posse at the hotel he resolved to investigate a little.

Meantime Captain Flash himself had prepared for the event of the day—his wedding.

It wanted ten minutes of the hour when he noticed a man coming toward the house, and the following moment Golddust George stood before him.

The high-sheriff of Sunset did not look very comfortable, and the glance he received from Captain Flash did not increase his happiness.

In a few words he related the encounter at the hotel, and then awaited the nabob's criticism.

"You let him bluff you, I see," said Captain Flash. "You let this handsome roustabout from the coast beat you and your hundred men."

"We know where he is."

"But the cards are in his hands. He holds the deck, does this cool devil."

"Shall we arrest him now?"

"No!" thundered Captain Flash. "You shall do nothing of the kind. I'll take the matter in hand myself."

"Not single-handed?" inquired Golddust George, a slight pallor coming to his face.

"Why not? Why call on you men to fight my battles when one man scares you out?"

"You know what he said about Centipede?" answered Golddust George.

"You let that influence you, eh? That was only a subterfuge. It won't work."

"He will meet you at any time."

"That's what he says. Then he shall meet me soon, but not till after the ceremony."

Captain Flash paced the floor a moment, but wheeling quickly he faced Golddust George.

"Where is Parson Blake?" he inquired.

"I saw him on the plaza coming down."

"He should be here by this time."

"And Effie?"

"I have concluded to have the ceremony performed at her house. She won't object to that."

The Czar of Sunset glanced at his watch and continued:

"Send Blake thither at once. I'll join him there in a few minutes, and, you, don't lose sight of the Jonah of Sunset—Sandy Sam."

Golddust George promised that he would not, and once more Captain Flash was alone.

The instant the door closed behind the high-sheriff the nabob bounded from the room and opened a door in the floor of the one adjoining it.

A dark, cavernous opening was thus revealed, and the sharp eyes of Captain Flash saw a flight of steps.

He lowered himself into the pit and groped his way some distance down an avenue of darkness.

At last he stopped and listened, leaning forward, with one hand crooked behind his ear.

"I can't hear him," he said, half aloud. "I wonder if Centipede carried out my instructions to the letter?"

Captain Flash took a lucifer from his pocket and struck it on the wall at his right hand.

In the light thus obtained he went forward again along a rough wall, holding the flaming match in front of him.

"I'm near the edge of the pit, yet I can't hear a sound," he said. "Centipede had time to bring him down here, and if he failed me, woe to his treacherous heart!"

The match went out, but he struck another, and this one seemed to show him a long-sought sight.

He halted on the fringe of a pit some fifty feet in depth, almost circular in

shape, and with concave walls at the bottom.

Captain Flash held the match between thumb and finger a moment, and then sent it whirling into the place.

It burned on the floor of the pit, where it struck and illuminated the place fairly well.

"He is there!" cried the nabob of Sunset. "The cage holds the bird!"

These words were heard by the occupant of the pit, for there stepped into the light of the match a man whose face was upturned toward Captain Flash's.

"Coward! I am here," came up from below. "Your yellow wolf arrived in time to save your life, for as my name is Hugh Holloway, I intended to send you to your deserts."

A bitter laugh was the nabob's answer.

"The most craven heart in all Montana beats in your bosom, Kidded Eric," continued Hugh from the middle of the pit. "Never fighting one fairly, you have lived by evil doing and the worst crimes of the decalogue are your passports some day to perdition."

"Chirp on, my bird," laughed the villain. "Sing your little song till your voice gives out, for there is no release."

"Villain! You dare not come down or have me dragged up for the purpose of finishing the duel Centipede interrupted."

"I have no notion of the kind."

"Of course you haven't."

"I am now about to take unto myself the prettiest wife in Montana, the fair Wind-flower of Sunset."

Hugh uttered a mad cry and sprang forward, but suddenly halted as if the full horror of his situation had just been revealed to him.

"I'm sorry you can't be best man," continued Captain Flash in tones of cutting sarcasm. "I know it would delight Miss Effie to have you so act on the occasion."

Hugh did not reply, and standing now in darkness, the match having flickered and gone out, he changed his position and waited for Captain Flash to speak again.

"It was a wild goose chase, my bird," came down from the fringe of the pit.

"Never mind. The mills of the gods never fail to grind the grist of vengeance."

"Good!" laughed the young man's tormentor. "I will fetch my fair bride here by and bye and let her see the bird in the underground cage."

This was too much.

Hugh Holloway broke forth into tirade of anathemas which only drew from Captain Flash a laugh of bitterness, after which the prisoner, seeing the uselessness of his words, desisted.

Suddenly another match flitted down from overhead, and with it came Captain Flash's farewell.

Then the youth saw the figure vanish from the edge of the wall, and for a moment heard him making his way back.

Captain Flash brushed his clothes in the room he had vacated to visit the captive of the subterranean dungeon and quitted the house.

He made his way along the street and stopped at the door of Effie's home.

It was opened from the inside as he raised the latch, and a man clad in a faded suit of broadcloth stood before him.

"I'm a little late, parson," said Captain Flash, but he checked himself, for his gaze had flitted round the room.

"She isn't here, captain."

"Not here?"

"Look," said the parson of Sunset, waving his hand to the remotest corner of the room. "The place is just as I found it ten minutes ago."

Captain Flash seemed stunned.

"When did she flee?" he asked at last.

"I cannot say."

"You did not see her, Blake?"

"I did not."

"What means this?" and Captain Flash rolled the dummy from the couch.

"It is the girl's trick."

"I see it! Gone, the Windflower of Sunset."

Parson Blake did not reply, but drew off a pace and watched the maddened man.

"She didn't do this herself!" cried the nabob.

"Perhaps not."

"She had help and advisement. The traitress must give an account of herself."

"Is there a traitress in this game?"

"Yes. You know her, Blake. Montana Maude."

"What, the girl's guardian and your friend a traitress?"

"Never much my friend, though I have trusted the woman. She has leagued herself with the man from the coast. She has been exiled, but she stopped long enough to interfere with my wedding."

The nabob of Sunset turned to the door and looked out.

"Both of them are in the mountains," cried he. "The two women are out yonder and they are trying to put miles between me and themselves. But they don't know Captain Flash. They have yet to learn the power of the man from the Mad Lariats."

He struck the door with his fist and wheeled upon the man who watched him.

"A bride in the hand is better than a bride in the bush!" suddenly laughed Captain Flash. "The Windflower of Sunset can no more escape this mountain altar than she can fly to the North Pole. I will find them. I will bring both back to Sunset, the one for her bridal and the other for doom. As for this new man in the drama—Sam Sherlock, my old enemy and the secret hunter of the west—I will show him that, cunning as he is, he can be crushed as easily as an iron hand crushes an egg!"

The door was jerked open by the hand of Captain Flash, and the next moment the master of the mountain camp stood in the full sunlight in the middle of the street.

No one seemed to see him.

Parson Blake in the doorway watched him a moment, and then followed, but suddenly Captain Flash turned and rushed toward the house behind the pines.

In the little room where so many scenes in the present drama have occurred, he stopped and thrust another revolver into his pockets; then, dashing from the house by a rear door, he appeared at the stable behind the nabob's mansion.

"It's a fresh trail. I'll need at least three boys, and I'll pick them up in the square. Where's Centipede? Why don't the yellow snake show up? But never mind. I don't need him in this enterprise. I will turn Montana Maude over to him when I come back, and, by heavens! Centipede shall become a benedict whether the bride suits him or not. What, crush Captain Flash in his own camp? Crush Kidded Eric of the old band? We'll see!"

Half a minute later the nabob of Sunset led a horse from the stall, but in another second he heard a voice, at sound of which he turned and swept one hand toward his hip.

"Not so fast, captain. I want a word with you before you go. You know me."

"Know you? I would be a fool if I didn't, Sandy Sam," and Captain Flash let the rein drop from his hand.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WITNESS OF THE BOOT.

Captain Flash at last stood face to face with the Shadow Sport from Frisco, and for a while it seemed that he rather enjoyed the situation.

"You want to speak to me," he said, looking Sandy Sam in the face. "You came to Sunset for this purpose, yet you could have sought me out sooner."

"It is not that I have not cared to speak to you before this. You are going away."

"Yes," hoarsely.

"You were going to the mountains."

"Perhaps."

"You were going out after the bride who has slipped through your hands."

Captain Flash's face darkened.

"Why shouldn't I?" he exclaimed.

"Who has a better right to hunt the girl than I?"

"That depends," quietly said Sandy Sam. "We are not here to discuss your rights. I am here to talk."

"And not to fight?" half growled Captain Flash. "Well, I am here; but time is passing."

"I know it."

The Czar of Sunset backed against the door of the stable and awaited the Shadow Sport's next play.

For half a minute Sandy Sam gazed into the face before him, and then he put out his hand.

It fell upon the shoulder of Captain Flash like a snow-flake, but at the same time the touch was firm.

"You remember the Golden Twins' last visit to Sunset, when they watched the burial of old Raper?" said Sam.

"Yes."

"They fetched the body of the old man from the mountain."

"They did."

"They found him dead beside a large boulder and they picked him up, knowing that he belonged to Sunset."

"Everybody knew that," said Captain Flash. "Old Raper was a queer character."

"None queerer, but the assassin found him and took the old man unawares."

Captain Flash did not speak for a moment, and then his voice seemed to have lost some of its clearness.

"This is simply losing time for me. You cannot keep me from the trail by a trick of this kind."

"At any rate you will hear me through."

Sandy Sam was cool and collected, and he felt that he faced a man his equal in many things.

On the other hand, Captain Flash was beginning to exhibit a little impatience and his face betrayed him in this particular.

"Let us go to the house," suggested Sandy Sam.

"Done!" exclaimed the other, and the two men turned from the stable and Captain Flash led the way to the house.

In the room where Centipede had thrown himself upon Hugh Holloway Captain Flash waved his visitor to a chair, but Sandy Sam stood near the table.

"Very well," said the captain. "You do not care to sit? Go on now. We are alone in my castle and you can speak."

"We will go back to old Raper. He once possessed a chart done on sheep-skin or old parchment, said to be the chart of a mine of almost fabulous wealth."

"An old man's fancy," smiled Captain Flash. "I take no stock in these stories."

"But Raper Donalds possessed a chart of this kind."

"Such was common tradition."

"It was his ward's legacy. It was to enrich Effie after he was dead and gone."

"I have heard that. But old Raper never counted much on the chart. Indeed, he seemed to feel that he carried next his heart a will-o'-the-wisp in the shape of an old bit of leather."

During this time Sandy Sam did not once remove his eyes from Captain Flash, as if he suspected that the cool master of Sunset would take undue advantage of him at some unguarded moment.

"What became of the old chart?" suddenly asked the Shadow Sport.

Captain Flash shook his head.

"You don't know?"

"Why should I know?"

"The man who saw old Raper last alive in the mountains knows."

"I don't doubt it, if the old man was murdered."

The gaze of Sandy Sam wandered to Captain Flash's boots and seemed to settle there.

The nabob of Sunset noticed the glance, and his face lost a trifle of its freshness.

"Captain, you will oblige me by holding up your right foot," said the Shadow Sport.

The nabob did not stir.

Sandy Sam suddenly whipped out a revolver and pointed it at the nabob's head.

Not a word came over the polished barrel of the deadly six-shooter, but Captain Flash saw that resolution was behind it.

"We are alone, you tell me," continued Sam. "That is good; then no one but ourselves can see the bottom of your right boot when you turn it up for inspection."

Captain Flash seemed only to plant his right foot the firmer on the floor, and for a second his eyes shone with the light of defiance.

"I shall take a look at your boot on the foot of a dead man if you prove stubborn," said the Shadow Sport. "This is not the land of the Mad Lariats, Captain, but Sunset, and you are the acknowledged master here. Think of it. All the pards of the mines are at your back; they have been your abject slaves for years, yet you refuse to show the sole of your boot to me."

Captain Flash suddenly elevated his foot, and the bottom of the boot was to be seen by Sandy Sam.

The Shadow Sport appeared to lean a little forward as he looked at the sole with the rows of crossed nails, a peculiar mark in its way, but he did not speak.

"Is that boot different from others in Sunset, that you must inspect it?" grated Captain Flash.

"It is a peculiar boot. It has been in the hills."

"Only with its owner," was the instant rejoinder. "No one wears it but Captain Flash!"

"That's good," smiled Sandy Sam. "You wore it the night old Raper died."

"I cannot say, but perhaps I did."

"Now, sir, what became of the old man's legacy?"

The question was a direct one, and the man from the coast looked Captain Flash squarely in the face.

"You must not ask me," he cried.

"You come to the wrong man for information on that score. If, as you intimate, old Raper carried the chart the night he died, and did not have it when the Golden Twins found him, you must ask other people for a key to the puzzle. You forget, Sandy Sam, that I am Captain Flash, not the assassin."

Coolly said, these words came from the speaker's lips tinged with defiance.

"I am here for the chart—the legacy which belongs now to Miss Effie."

"The house is before you," cried Captain Flash. "But beware! This is not the Land of the Mad Lariats, as you say; but it may prove to be the death region of Sunset."

The man of Sunset came forward as he finished, and in spite of the menacing revolver of Sandy Sam he smiled.

He might have lifted his hand and dashed the weapon to the floor, but perhaps he thought the foe might prove a little quicker; at any rate he made no aggressive movement.

"Come," said Sandy Sam, "the chart!"

"Find it!"

"The chart or death in your own castle, Kidded Eric."

"That name does not stir me," laughed Captain Flash. "It has had its day, and the world is no longer interested in the doings of Kidded Eric."

"That is false. The world, or at least a portion of it, still wonders what became of you."

"Does it? And are you the world's agent to solve the mystery?"

"Partly so."

"Agent and avenger, eh?"

"Yes."

Captain Flash was silent, but his eyes spoke.

"The chart—the one you stole from the dead body of Raper, the miner. Your boot has betrayed you. You don't know, perhaps, that the soft earth near the scene of crime has hardened—strangely so—since that night. You don't know that your foot-track is as plain there now as when Taos and Tophet found it the early morning after the deed."

"It is false!"

"The very nails in your boot-sole betray the man who followed the old miner into the mountain or decoyed him thither. You haven't forgotten the old cunning that made you famous in the Land of the Mad Lariats. You remember the vanishment of Jerry, the Peon, down there? Well, there was a boot mark in the ground where the poor devil got his quietus and the trailers followed it across leagues of burning earth to lose it at last in what was then the capital of Kidded Eric's domain."

"When you at last concluded to remove to another portion of the country, to change your name and thus bury your identity, you put the best of them off the scent. Kidded Eric vanished and in his stead came Captain Flash, with a few years between the murders in the Land of the Mad Lariats and the death of the owner of the chart. Old Raper became your marked victim from the moment you discovered that he really carried next his heart a chart which has been missing almost from the days of the old Spaniards."

"How the old miner became the owner of the chart is never to be made clear, now that he is dead," continued Sandy Sam, as Captain Flash maintained a solemn silence, apparently waiting for him to go on. "That is the secret he carried into the dark unknown, but the chart itself, with the 'key,' intended it become Effie's legacy, proved too tempting for you. You could not resist it, Captain Flash, and the old man found you a foe when he thought you a friend. You call me agent and avenger. I am both. I am from the Land of the Mad Lariats. I am now Sandy Sam, but once perhaps you recall the time I was Silver Sherlock, the Frisco Spotter. Time has changed me but little men say. It has brought us together after years of separation, for you remember the last face you looked into ere you quitted the Land of the Mad Lariats and turned your face northward to new scenes and Sunset?"

"I remember," said the listening nabob. "I had you in my power that night. It was at San Marino, the little station on the line. I let you go. I wanted to get across the line, and fool-like, thinking that some day I would probably meet you when I would have the same chance, I let you go."

The faintest of smiles came to Sandy Sam's mouth and tarried there for a second, but the face of the cornered nabob was as stern as death.

He seemed to be waiting for something, perhaps for the footsteps of Centipede; at any rate he looked wistfully at the door and held his breath.

"Come! The time is up," said Sandy Sam in tones that started the nabob. "I am here for the chart."

"I have spoken. Find it."

Before the master spirit of Sunset could make the quickest move the left hand of Sandy Sam fell upon his arm and closed there like a vise.

"Over your dead body, and then there will be no wedding!" cried the Sport from Frisco, as he thrust the cocked six-shooter into Captain Flash's face. "This is no child's play. Your man, Centipede, will not come to your rescue. His feet wander elsewhere. The yellow dog who crept at your heels in the Land of the Lariats will not enter your door till I am done with you. Quick, now. The chart—old Raper's legacy or death!"

There was a cry and a sudden spring forward, and Captain Flash and the Shadow Sport were in each other's grasp over against the door.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRAIL OF THE FUGITIVES.

"Don't flush the birds. Go a little easy, Taos. If they see you they'll take flight an' we'll have all our labor for our pains."

The man thus addressed looked back at his companion and continued to creep forward.

The Twins, still in the mountains not far from the spot where they had encountered Sandy Sam, had sniffed a rich prize and for some time had been watching a pair of women who were ascending to their level.

Tophet, with his face flushed, a sign of coming victory, crept on until he reached a spot whence he could look down into a small basin where the women had halted.

Taos at his heels caught the meanful glance in his eye, and parted the shrubbery with his dark hands.

"They're ther angels from Sunset," said the latter. "Maude an' the Wind-flower."

Tophet nodded.

"W'ot fetches 'em up here? Listen! W'ot's that the young bird's sayin'—runnin' away from the altar, eh? By Jove! Tophet, she's run off."

Tophet, feasting his eyes upon the pair totally oblivious of their proximity, smiled a little and then crept closer.

"Shall I?" he asked, glancing at Taos as he put one of his big hands to his mouth.

"Wait. Mebbe after all they're not alone," was the reply.

For ten minutes the two men lay in ambush and watched the women like a brace of hawks, and at the end of this time they uttered a sound, at which the fugitives started.

"It came from up yonder," cried Effie of Sunset, as she sprang to her feet and stood with blanched cheeks looking toward the spot where the Twins were hidden. "Can it be that Captain Flash has trailed us already?"

"I do not think so, Effie. In the first place, you gave him the slip so nicely, and he wouldn't be likely to discover your absence till the hour set apart for the ceremony."

"But the noise yonder? It was no bird call."

"I'll see."

Montana Maude, taking a revolver from its hiding place and clutching it firmly, advanced toward the Twins and scrutinized the concealing shrubbery.

Effie Donalds stood still and watched her.

Suddenly the clever eye of Montana Maude detected an object among the bushes overhead, and in an instant she raised the six-shooter.

"Don't shoot!" cried Taos, as he rose, towering above the bushes. "We mean no harm—"

"Merciful heavens! the twin stranglers!" fell from Effie's tongue. "We have fallen into the talons of the mountain hawks. Better the hands of Captain Flash!"

Menaced by Maude's weapon, the two men came down the trail, showing their teeth in a grin of delight, and halted in full view of the fugitives.

"Didn't expect ter have this honor," said Taos, doffing his hat, but addressing himself more particularly to Effie. "Seems ter me I've seen this young lady afore, an' now she seems ter suspicion Taos of Tartarus, ha, ha!"

Tophet, a little taller than his brother, stood apart, looking at Montana Maude and seeming to wonder if he dared advance another step in the face of the revolver.

"Pardon the Twins," continued Taos. "Didn't we just hear you intimate that Sunset had ceased ter be ther congenial place it used ter be?"

Maude's face flushed.

She waved her hand toward Effie and stepped between her and the Twin, as if to interpose herself as a shield.

"This girl is under my protection!"

she said to the men. "I am her guardian and have been ever since you carried old Raper into Sunset."

"Exactly, miss. That was some time ago, an' we've regretted the old pard's death ever since. Of course the young lady's safe in your hands," and Taos looked at the six-shooter in Maude's grip as he finished.

"She is a fugitive," said Maude. "She has fled from the altar."

"Jes' what I overheard her say."

"Had she remained till now in Sunset she would be Captain Flash's bride."

"That pretty flower?"

"Effie, the Wind-flower."

"An', as her guardian, you coaxed her ter fly from the ceremony? It's your work, eh, Montana Maude?"

"My hand was in the game. I'll admit that," and Maude's eyes lit up with a vivid light.

"I thought you stood in with Captain Flash."

"I've been his friend, but no longer can he claim my friendship."

"The ways hev parted, eh?" laughed the bronzed outlaw of the hills. "Well, you'll find friends in Taos and Tophet, the Twins o' Tartarus. We don't wear wings 'cause we ain't angels, nor hoofs 'cause we're not exactly demons."

"We trust you, then," answered Montana Maude. "We can throw ourselves upon your mercy and not have our confidence betrayed."

"Sartainly. But tell us. Wot became o' the young chap who spun Taos round in Dead Woman's Gulch when we held up the last stage?"

"We left him in Sunset," said Effie. "You mean Hugh Holloway, o' course."

"Freeze ter that name, brother," remarked the outlaw, addressing his companion. "We may want ter make use o' it by and bye."

"The young man is my friend's friend," said Maude, waving her hand at Effie. "You are the person he shot at in the gulch?"

Taos pushed up his hat and disclosed on his left temple a reddish streak.

"It war a close call," he answered with a smile. "I went around like a top an' he took ther lines and went down ther gulch like a streak o' greased lightning. Never saw ther like in all my born days. The bullet struck my hat, and stunned me enough ter spin me around like a top."

Montana Maude, standing in the clear light of day, had turned and was looking down the mountain.

The tops of the houses in Sunset were just visible from the spot where they had halted, and for some time Captain Flash's old friend, but now his enemy, looked upon the scene with unexpressed emotions.

"Aren't you goin' back?" asked Tophet, walking closer to Effie, who started at the question and shivered.

"Back to that place?" she exclaimed. "Why should I?"

"Yes, why should you?" cried Montana Maude. "To become Captain Flash's wife?"

"He may trail you, girl."

"I look for that," responded Effie. "I am not to escape without trouble from him."

"But why was the match broken in this manner?"

"She was his promised bride," broke in Montana Maude. "I helped to bring about the match, though I do not care to be called a match-maker. Captain Flash has been unmasked."

"Who did that?"

"The man who came to Sunset a few hours ago."

"Sandy Sam?"

"Yes. He came thither for a purpose. This man knows the past history of Captain Flash. I know it now."

Taos laughed and threw a swift glance toward his brother.

"What have you been doing that you never knew it before?" he queried.

"I never cared to go too deep into the past of Captain Flash. I had my rea-

sons for not doing so. But the moment I learned all I resolved to save Effie from his power."

"At the risk of gettin' inter trouble yerself?"

"Yes. I dared the lion in his den. I am now an exile from Sunset—exiled by one of Captain Flash's mandates."

"And it would be death ter go back against that mandate?"

"I would go back to save this girl if she were still there!" exclaimed Maude.

"But look down yonder!" suddenly cried Effie of Sunset, pointing down the trail, which now and then lost itself between the table-land and the level where Sunset was situated.

All four looked down the mountain, Maude shading her eyes, and Taos and Tophet gazing in silence.

"Horsemen!" said Maude audibly, and Effie threw her arms about the woman's waist and continued to look in silence.

"There are seven," said Tophet.

"It is Captain Flash on my trail!"

The Twins looked at Effie and saw how pale her cheeks were, then they glanced into Maude's face and noticed the flashing eyes.

"Have they sighted us yet?" asked the young girl.

"I don't know. Their eyes ar' keen, but—"

"They've halted! See! They gather about one of their number. That must be Captain Flash."

For at least ten minutes the little party on the mountain side continued to gaze at the spectacle beneath them, and then Montana Maude whirled upon the Twins.

"We are being hunted by the tigers of Sunset," said she. "We don't ask you to defend us. We cannot ask you to take any risks against those men yonder, all of whom are Captain Flash's slaves."

"Slaves an' tools," put in Tophet. "What has become of the man from the coast?"

"Those men can answer that question best," was the reply, and once more Maude's finger covered the cavalcade, all the time growing larger as they neared the table-land. "You see they are well mounted, but the race is not always with the swift."

Taos leaned against a tree that grew near by, and for several moments seemed to regard the party underneath with a show of insatiable curiosity.

"Come," said Maude. "Come, Effie, we will again try the virtue of flight. We are not altogether harmless. See," and the woman uncovered two revolvers, the butts of which reflected back the rays of the morning sun. "These only as a last resort."

"It's been a brave act for them—huntin' you two women from Sunset," said Taos, and then he led Maude aside and continued in tones which did not reach Effie's ears:

"If we save you two—if we keep the men down yonder at bay, rescuin' the girl from the hands o' Captain Flash, what shall our reward be?"

Montana Maude, flushing, looked into the dark face of the mountain outlaw, drew back and gave him a scowl for an answer.

"Reward?" she cried, as she caught her breath. "We will talk of that some other time."

"It's true, then?" said Taos.

"What is true?"

"The wooin' o' Centipede."

Montana Maude burst into a laugh, but the next moment she looked indignant.

"That yellow reptile?" she exclaimed.

"You don't mean that, Captain Taos?"

"We've heard it down yonder. It is common talk in Sunset. The match war made by Captain Flash himself an' Centipede's weddin' is soon ter foller his master's."

"That yellow reptile?" repeated Montana Maude with added emphasis, and her fingers got a firmer clutch about the butt of the revolver. "I've killed serpents better than Centipede," and she stepped back to Effie's side.

The horsemen for the moment had been hidden from sight, but the Twins knew that in a little while they would come into view again, and all watched silently.

Suddenly they did so, and Montana Maude uttered a sharp cry.

"It is Captain Flash himself!" she exclaimed. "You need not defend us. We will fight for our own salvation, and woe to the wretch who seeks to drag us back to Sunset!"

Her hand seized Effie's wrist, and with another glance down the winding trail she darted away with the fugitive bride.

CHAPTER XIV.

SANDY SAM'S PERIL.

It was with the bound of a tiger that Captain Flash fell upon Sandy Sam in the nabob's house.

The two men, from the first locked in one another's embrace, went against the door.

The Sport from Frisco felt at his throat the hands of the master of Sunset, and knew that a fight for his very existence was ahead.

Captain Flash, on the other hand, felt that he was battling for life, and with all his might he held the Spotter against the door and tried to finish the game.

Not a word fell from the lips of the men after the first attack.

Sandy Sam for a moment got the advantage over his enemy, but Captain Flash rendered it fruitless by a dextrous move, and the next moment the Shadow Sport was in the nabob's power.

Fate for once at least was against the man from the coast, and Captain Flash dragged the half-unconscious man to the heavy chair at the table and threw him into it.

"It's a poor game that can't be played more ways than one!" he cried, drawing off a pace and looking at the occupant of the chair. "The agent and avenger has failed, and he will never go back to report his losing game."

Captain Flash went over to the niche in the wall and brought forward a packet which he opened in Sandy Sam's presence.

"Look," he went on, displaying a bit of parchment which he took from the pocket-book. "You asked about old Raper's secret. Behold it!"

Sandy Sam, whose arms had been fastened to those of the chair looked at the prize thrust into his face, but he did not speak.

"It is in my hands. I hold the key to the greatest bonanza in the world. It is the door-way of the great Billion Mine, lost for two centuries. When I have the mine in my hands and the girl bride under my roof, who will be happier than Captain Flash?"

He laughed at the end of his sentence as he restored the parchment to the pocket-book and put the whole away in the same niche.

"I'm going off," he went on. "You won't be here long alone. You will have company."

He proceeded coolly to don another suit of clothes before his victim, after which he came forward with a devilish leer in his dark eyes.

Suddenly he threw a handkerchief over Sandy Sam's face and pressed it into his mouth, while he drew the ends tight behind his ears.

In this manner the Shadow Sport was effectually gagged and his eyes sparkled while Captain Flash regarded him.

"I say you won't be alone very long," he repeated. "I'm going off to look for a bird that's left the nest. Don't you wish Kidded Eric good luck, Sandy Sam?"

Captain Flash crossed the room, and after a farewell look at the tenant of the chair vanished.

Sandy Sam heard him in the adjoining room; then the sounds died away and the house of the nabob of Sunset became as still as the grave.

For more than an hour the Shadow

Sport had the room and his thoughts to himself.

No one came up the walk between the young pines and no one opened the door.

Now and then he heard voices on the square, the noisy voices of the pards of the mountain camp; but even these died away at last, and he felt the loneliness of his situation stealing into the very depths of his heart.

But at last he caught sight of a figure in the walk beyond the door.

He was seated where he could look down the avenue of pines and almost to the plaza.

With a slight cry the person who came up the walk appeared before Sandy Sam and the Shadow Sport looked into the face of Centipede, the yellow sport.

The deep-set eyes of Centipede seemed to bulge out while he gazed first at the sport's bonds and then into his face.

"Caught, eh?" he leered, bending forward till his face almost touched Sam's.

Sandy Sam only looked and, prevented by the gag, made no answer.

"Did the cap'n ketch you?"

The Shadow Sport nodded slightly.

"He's a slick one," laughed Centipede.

"When you get ahead o' the cap'n you stay up all night."

The little man made the rounds of the room, and noticed that Sandy Sam's bonds were good ones.

"You're fixed for a long stay," he said, coming round in front of the Shadow Sport's face.

There was no doubt of that, as the cords attested, and Sandy Sam was ready to confirm the yellow tool's observation.

"The bird's in the bush—up in the mountains," suddenly went on Centipede, folding his arms as he leaned against the table. "She's gone away an' left a dummy in the shanty. It war the slick-est trick ever played in Sunset, and the cap'n don't like it at all."

"By the way," Centipede suddenly continued. "How did the cap'n git the best o' you?"

Then, recollecting that Sandy Sam was in no condition to answer him, he jerked off the gag and the sport in the chair caught his breath.

"Thar! don't say there's no heart in Centipede," he exclaimed. "You've got possession of yer talkin' apparatus. Now tell me how Cap'n Flash ever netted you."

It was not a very pleasant story for Shadow Sam to tell, but he did not go into details.

"Well," said Centipede, "you're good for a stay here till he comes back unless we could make a bargain."

What, a bargain with this piece of yellow treachery?

The Shadow Sport did not betray the joy the words caused.

"You're Centipede," he said. "You wouldn't betray Captain Flash. You're under his thumb and you owe the very breath you breathe to him."

"That's about right," grinned the little man. "I'm not the only one in Sunset who owes the same debt."

"Of course not. There are others. Captain Flash holds all of you in the hollow of his hand and you all live only by his sufferance."

"True. We're his slaves, eh?"

"The most abject slaves a man ever had. Centipede, you have served Kidded Eric a long time."

"Yes. You call him by the old name."

"The title he earned in the Land of the Mad Lariats! You remember the fight in the ranch on the line?"

Centipede started.

"That was years ago," he said with a smile. "I came near losing my napper that night. Some one pulled me from the melee after they put the lights out—"

"And thrēw you across a horse in front of the ranche?"

"Yes. Who told you?"

"I am the man who did you that service."

For a moment Centipede gazed speech-

less into Sandy Sam's face and seemed to doubt his statement.

"Prove it," he said.

"Isn't my recollection of that night proof enough?" was the reply.

"I'd like to have a little more."

"You nearly fell from the horse after you were thrown across it. You were held on by your preserver, and the animal started off. The saddle turned, but the man fixed it."

Centipede sprang forward with a cry and laid his hand on the knife in his sash.

But still he hesitated.

He was befriending the foe of Captain Flash, and he could not do that.

Sandy Sam watched the yellow man, but did not speak again.

"I can't," said Centipede, shoving back the half-drawn knife. "I belong by oath to Captain Flash."

"I know that."

"I dare not betray him in any manner."

"Never had a greater rascal a more abject tool, yet, to save himself, Kidded Eric would sacrifice you, Centipede."

"I doubt that."

"You have felt the hand of treachery."

"His hand?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"One year after the fight at the ranche. You remember the night of storm in the canyon, when you lost your horse?"

"Yes; the devil was abroad that night."

"And so was treason."

"But not by Captain Flash's hand."

"Where did you find your steed the next morning?"

"In his hands."

"And but for a lucky step in the darkness of the canyon you would have perished?"

"That is true."

"Did you ever think, Centipede, that you were left alone in that place by the man who could have saved you when he stole your horse?"

"Stop!" thundered the little man, clutching Sandy Sam's arm. "You must not prejudice me against Cap'n Flash. You are only tryin' me. I will not listen. Good-by!"

Centipede dashed from the room, and Sandy Sam heard his footsteps for a moment ere they died away.

He was alone again.

He had failed to corrupt Centipede, and he was left to await the return of Kidded Eric.

It might be days before that event took place, and he would remain the captive of the nabob's house, unseen by any human eye but Centipede's, the faithful.

Time passed wearily to the Shadow Sport.

He saw the shadows in the walk grow long and darkness at last settle down over the scene.

What would the night bring forth—a sudden attack by Centipede, or the return of the nabob of Sunset?

Sandy Sam was immovable in the chair, and the cords seemed to cut into his flesh.

Captain Flash had made no poor job of the business, and the Shadow Sport was compelled to admire his work.

The house grew as dark as it was silent.

Beyond the trees the tenant of the room saw the lights in the Winged Lazarus, and heard now and then sounds of humanity in the plaza.

All at once a door opened softly behind him.

He turned his head and made out over against the wall the outlines of a human being.

Whoever was there had come in with the stealthiness of a cat, and had halted perhaps to inspect the place.

The figure was taller than Centipede's, so at least thought the Shadow Sport, and he watched it in silence while it moved from the wall and glided toward him.

"Jupiter!" suddenly cried the newcomer, as he caught sight of the chair and its occupant. "I've found you at last, Hugh!"

Sandy Sam did not speak.

"In the trap, an' in the toils, jes' as I suspected, but wait. I've got the keenest knife in Sunset. Thar! You're free now."

The severed cords had dropped alongside the chair, but the tall and bearded man with the knife in his hand had fallen back with his lower jaw dropped in fright.

"You aren't Hugh," he cried. "By Jove! I've unloosed the wrong man."

The Shadow Sport caught the speaker's arm and pulled him forward.

"I am not Hugh; I am Sandy Sam."

"The man what beat the Twins!" laughed the other. "I see now. Whar's Hugh?"

"I don't know."

"He came hither."

"Did he?"

"An' I've watched the nest ever since. He's here yet. He's somewhar in Captain Flash's trap, an' it must yield him up."

Rube Ransom had come to the Sport's deliverance.

CHAPTER XV.

UNDERGROUND SUNSET.

The Sport from Frisco did not know what had become of Centipede.

That worthy had quitted the room after facing him awhile, and finding himself under obligations to the prisoner of the chair, yet not daring to release him, owing to his oath of allegiance to Captain Flash.

But Rube, the miner—Rube, Hugh's friend, had come to the rescue, and the Shadow Sport and the bearded silver hunter stood alone in the room.

Rube had come to the nabob's house for the purpose of finding out what had become of Hugh, the hero of the hold-up in Dead Woman's Gulch, and he was convinced that the young man was somewhere in the house in the toils, if not dead.

Sandy Sam and the miner advanced at once to the search, and hunted the place over without results.

"He came to the den. He came to beard the lion here," said Rube. "He never left the house."

"Then he must be here."

"Woe to Captain Flash if Hugh had met with misfortune in this den!"

Sandy Sam found in the wall where they had overlooked it a door which would not yield, and the two men drew back and stared at it.

The miner would have launched himself against the stubborn portal if at that moment it had not swung open and the lithe figure of Centipede appeared.

"Jes' the snake we want!" exclaimed Rube. "Show us the way to Hugh."

Centipede looked at the two friends, but did not speak.

"Come! where is he?"

"You speak in riddles," was the answer. "I know nothing of the person you ask for."

"It is false! You were here when he entered the trap. You have served Captain Flash for years and his bidding you have never failed to do, even to murder."

Centipede drew back and threw up one hand.

"Hear him," he said to Sandy Sam. "Is the man mad?"

"Nearly so," cried Rube. "Show us the trail that leads to him."

There was silence as before, and for half a second Rube Ransom, his eyes flashing like stars, stood before Centipede when all at once he sprang forward.

At the same moment out from beneath the little man's garments leaped a revolver, which seemed to cock itself as it covered the old silver-hunter.

"One step!" said Centipede, defiantly. "One step and get a grave on the mountain."

Rube checked himself and gazed at

the man with the six-shooter, while Sandy Sam seemed to enjoy the tableau.

"You know," accused Rube.

"Prove it."

"I will!"

The old miner threw one foot forward and the weapon seemed to touch his forehead.

Sandy Sam laid one hand on Rube's arm and pulled him back.

"This is Captain Flash's house," said Centipede.

"It lies on my trail."

"You pass on that trail at your peril."

"Hear him," said Rube, with a glance at the Shadow Sport. "The golden reptile stands between us and Hugh."

"I stand here to defend the home of Captain Flash," was the reply. "I am Centipede. I owe my life to the nabob of Sunset, and I have sworn to defend him and this house with that life saved by him on three occasions."

"You hold the key to the fate of my friend Hugh. You must not refuse to reveal the secret."

A strange smile stole over Centipede's face.

"Search the house," said he. "I turn it over to you; but you must answer to my master."

"We'll so answer, eh, Sandy Sam?" cried Rube with glee. "Come! Stand aside, Centipede, since the mansion is to be ours to hunt over till we've solved the mystery."

"Remember! this house is one of mystery itself. You don't know what it contains. You will touch nothing that belongs to Captain Flash. Sandy Sam knows more about him than you, Rube Ransom. He can give you pointers about my master that might cause you to be cautious under this roof. But go. Find out what you can, but beware! Touch nothing that belongs to him. There's death in more forms than one in this house."

Centipede stepped aside and waved his hand toward the door across whose step he had just passed.

Rube stood irresolute a moment, and then seemed to shrink from the task.

"It's a nest o' traps—I know that," he said to Sandy Sam. "I know of another who years ago entered this place and never answered again to the roll call of the mines. Centipede is right. We have invaded a deathtrap set in the everlasting hills o' Montana."

"What will you do? Go on?"

"Yes, if every room contained a death-pit!"

Throwing wide the door, Rube Ransom plunged across the threshold, to find himself followed by Sandy Sam into a large chamber richly furnished.

Centipede, whose eyes gleamed like diamonds in his forehead, leaned against the jamb and quietly looked on.

A look of confidence lit up the little man's eyes and he seemed entirely at his ease.

It did not take Rube, eager and alert, long to search this room.

"He is not here," he said at last, and then he whirled upon Centipede. "Which way leads to the underground dungeons?"

Centipede did not answer.

"Come! The way thither at once!" cried the old miner. "This search is not to let up till I've solved the mystery that overhangs the fate of Hugh Holloway."

Sandy Sam saw a singular flash in the eyes that glared at Rube Ransom, and the following moment he said in lowered tones to the hot-headed miner:

"Don't push this hunt too far. The reptile is meditating evil."

"Let him try to play out the evil cards. Let this serpent of Montana throw down his best card an' I'll trump it with mine!"

Centipede beckoned the two men forward and led the way from the room into another.

"You ask for the underground trail,"

said he, halting in the middle of the floor and pointing toward a certain spot. "Lift the trap."

Eagerly Rube sprang forward and raised a door set ingeniously in the floor.

"At last!" exclaimed the miner, with a victorious glance at Sandy Sam. "We're on the right trail. We will now find Hugh."

Already Rube had reached the opening and was on the first step of the dark staircase.

"No! You shall come down first," he said to Centipede. "There shall be no treason here."

He caught the little man in his arms and bore him to the opening.

Centipede gritted his teeth, but over his yellow face spread a meaning smile.

He did not resist as he might have done, but on the contrary seemed willing to be carried down the flight.

At the bottom of the steps where Sandy Sam struck a light Rube released his prisoner and pushed him forward.

At the same time the muzzle of a revolver pressed against Centipede's head, told him in terrible language that at the first sign of treachery Captain Flash would lose his oath-bound tool, and the little man moved on.

Sandy Sam's improvised torch threw light upon the trail, which was a corridor seemingly cut out of solid rock, and the three men walked on.

For five minutes Centipede led them from one passage into another, nor paused a moment, as if the goal was far away.

"Down here somewhar lies Captain Flash's treasure," said Rube Ransom in whispers as he glanced aback at Sandy Sam. "We may not get ter see it, but it's here."

All at once Centipede paused and looked back at the faces behind him.

"Are we here?" asked Rube.

"Mebbe so."

"We want no uncertainty. We are here ter find Hugh. Go on."

"We are at the end of the trail."

Rube bit his lip and leaned forward.

"It is solid rock ahead," he said to the Shadow Sport. "We have been decoyed into a trap by the yellow viper!"

The next instant the torch in Sandy Sam's hand was dashed to the ground by a figure that seemed to leap over Rube's head, and the place was wrapped in darkness.

"The devil's given us the slip!" cried the old miner. "After all he's hoodwinked us!"

Sandy Sam had turned and thrown out his hands in hopes of seizing the flying Centipede, but they closed only on air, and he heard at his side the hoarse voice of Rube as it filled the place with emphatic expletives.

In a trap!

For some time the two men stood silent in the dark, and then Sandy Sam struck a lucifer on the wall.

The little flame flashed up, and the Shadow Sport held the light ahead.

"Out o' sight," cried Rube. "Thar's nothin' ahead but solid wall, and he didn't run through it."

"He went in yon direction," was the reply. "See! the ground is dust here. Look! here are the foot-tracks of the traitor."

Rube examined the marks in the dust on the floor of the corridor as betrayed by Sandy Sam's match, but he soon rose with disappointment on his face.

"We'll lose them soon," said he, despairingly. "Centipede, the viper, knows his business. Why didn't I paint the wall of the fine room with his brains?"

The friends moved back over the trail, the light showing them every now and then footprints in the dust.

At last Rube stopped and looked up into Sam's face.

"They've vanished!" he said.

Sandy Sam bent forward and swept his light over the floor of the pasageway.

It was true—the footprints had disappeared.

"We are in one of the death-traps he mentioned," continued Rube. "Centipede is as cool a demon as his master, and we are the last victims of Captain Flash's pits."

Further search failed to bring to light the lost tracks, and at last the two trailers stood in one of the narrow passages, silent and nearly breathless.

"We kin find the way back to the spot whar' he left us," suddenly exclaimed Rube. "I know the way, for I took pointers comin' here. Back to the reptile's place of treachery!"

They returned to the spot and Rube found before him as before a solid rock and a ceiling of unbroken stone.

Sandy Sam leaned against the wall and folded his arms.

The Shadow Sport was in a dilemma, and realized the danger that beset them.

"There's one way out of this," he said at last.

"Then out with it. Find that way, and we'll yet win the game against the nabob and his man."

"We must investigate every corridor. It can be done. There aren't so many but what we can do this. Time presses, Rube. We must give up for the present all hopes of finding Hugh Holloway."

"Find Centipede first. I want him," grated Rube.

At that moment a strange far-away sound came to their ears in the underground passage.

The old miner put his ear against the wall and listened with bated breath.

"I hear him!" he cried with a glance at Sandy Sam. "It's Hugh's voice, but in God's name, whar is he?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORY OF THE SHADOWER'S TRAIL.

The Shadow Sport sprang to Rube's side, and the two listened at the wall of stone.

"It war his voice! I know it," said the old miner in a whisper. "You'll hear it again presently. Thar!"

Sam heard the sound so like a human voice, but apparently deep in the heart of the earth, and he turned to his companion, saying:

"That noise come from some place lower than we are just now. It emanates from the depths of this underground den."

"Of course. We must try ter foller the sound. We must try ter locate it."

Rube led the way back.

The old silver hunter, familiar with the interior of mines, proceeded with a good deal of caution, stopping now and then to listen, as if the same sound must come again to his ears.

But it did not.

"We've lost 'im," said Rube at last as he halted, perplexed. "We can't catch the noise now, and p'raps Hugh has given up the fight."

Sandy Sam said nothing for a moment, but looked into the anxious face of his companion, revealed once more by the light of a match.

"What fetched you here ter Sunset?" inquired Rube.

The miner had leaned against a wall and his face betrayed the interest he put into the query.

"They call you the Shadow Sport from Frisco. They've accused you o' murder o' Robinet, but old Rube Ransom don't b'lieve a word o' it. You're no murderer."

"Not quite, Rube," smiled the Shadow Sport.

"You've got a mission. Captain Flash don't like you. Would you mind ter tell me here?"

Sandy Sam looked the rough figure over from head to foot, when old Rube said:

"It's a secret, is it? Thar, don't tell it, then."

"But it need not be a secret between us, Rube."

"I'd like ter hear it."

The match went out, and the place where they had halted was wrapped in darkness.

"You are right," began Shadow Sam. "I am a man with a mission, but one which you do not suspect. My trail has been a long one, and there's no telling how much longer it will be, nor where it will end. Years ago, in a region far south of this, near the Mexican line, lived a man called Kidded Eric."

"This man was a desperado of the coolest sort, a man with large means and plenty of abject tools about him. The possessor of half a dozen ranches, sufficient to keep him in superb style, the king of the trigger, and a master of the lariat in a land where the noose was in daily use. Kidded Eric was 'monarch of all he surveyed.' No one dared to cross him. He had but to lift his hand to decree death and exilement to those whom he hated, for it is doubtful if he feared a living being."

"Kidded Eric vanished once between two days. It was a singular vanishment. One morning a rancher rode up to the porch where Kidded Eric was wont to take his noonday siesta, and found in the arm-chair a man who was not the master of the six ranches. The man was dead. A total stranger in those parts, a fine-looking man with a dark face nearly covered with a snow-white beard, he was a striking-looking person even in death."

"No one knew him. They searched for Kidded Eric and his yellow valet, but without success. From that day the mystery deepened. The stranger was buried. They put him away behind the ranch house, and the vigilantes, believing that the dead man's blood was on the skirts of the pair, scoured the land for Kidded Eric."

"The mystery connected with the stranger's personality was in part solved. A man found afterward a clew that opened up the hunt again and made the finder an avenger and agent. Let me be plain with you, Rube. I am the person who solved the identity of the man found dead on Kidded Eric's veranda. His name was Howard Gray. Years before he reached these shores from across the water, the scion of as noble a family as ever existed. Here he married and raised a little family in California. But restless—it was in the blood—he quitted the home near the coast, and, with his child, a daughter, he plunged into wilder life in the gold hills, his wife having died some time before."

"From the time of his abandonment of civilized life to the moment when he was found dead on Kidded Eric's porch his life must have been an eventful one. He lost his child, a little girl, as I have said, in a storm in the Black Hills, then the abode of few white men, and mourned her as dead. Howard Gray left behind him ere he came to the Land of the Mad Lariats, in the hands of a man now known to me as Raper Donalds, the secret of his life, and another secret porch, dead, by whose hands?"

"He professed to have discovered in some manner one of those lost bonanzas which tradition traces back to the days of the Spaniards in the West. Indeed, he pretended to have the old chart which told its location. But death overtook him. It found him on Kidded Eric's porch, dead by whose hands?"

"By Kidded Eric's, of course," cried Rube.

"That is the proper inference," continued Sandy Sam. "Howard Gray came to the ranch after sundown. He never left it. What passed between him and Kidded Eric will never be told unless that man unseals his tongue. You ask me what became of the old chart. Wasn't a chart old Raper's hobby?"

"It was. We all knew that. And Old Raper was Effie's guardian. What if the girl was the murdered man's child?"

Sandy Sam said nothing for a moment, but his hand fell upon Rube Ransom's shoulder.

"There have been stranger things than even this, Rube," he said at last. "Old Raper gave out among you men

that Effie should become the richest heir-ess in Montana. He carried the key to the chart; so did Howard Gray, the wanderer and man of mystery. I have lost the trail. A man can hide in this great land and be lost for years, but something ferrets him out. It was thus with Kidded Eric. He went away between two days, and darkness hid his trail. Once I had him found, but he slipped away again. I saved his tool, Centipede, from a lot of half-crazy greasers, but the pair disappeared soon afterward."

"Captain Flash, who is Kidded Eric, knew me. He knew that I was on his trail, missing it now and picking it up again. He has been expecting me in Sunset. Perhaps he had his spy on the lookout, and the moment I appeared in the camp Centipede carried the news to his master. It is a long story—my trail and its disappointments. But I have taken an oath to turn not back till I have avenged the foul murder of Howard Gray in the Land of the Mad Lariats and restored to Miss Effie the old chart, her legacy, whether it amounts to anything or not."

"Captain Flash is on the eve of his wedding, as he supposes. He believes in the chart and the secret carried so long by Raper, the victim of crime in the mountains. The bird has escaped to the bush with Montana Maude and Captain Flash is on the trail."

"But the Twins?" eagerly inquired Rube.

"We've met before," answered the Shadow Sport, with a knowing smile. "They are remotely connected with the mystery I am solving. They know Captain Flash, both as Captain Flash and Kidded Eric. They don't like a drop of blood in his body, nor, for that matter, in mine," and the speaker smiled again.

"Yet they left Sunset at your command," cried the miner.

"They did not care to cross me here," said Sandy Sam. "Those men are veritable outlaws against whom the half has not been told. Taos and Tophet are men without conscience, and desperadoes whose life is one of outlawry. They, too, know something of the Land of the Mad Lariats; they know about the six ranches and their master who vanished so suddenly. But let me conclude, Rube. The time may come when Captain Flash will not rule Sunset with an iron hand, nor when he will not have at his beck and call the hundred men who would do anything for him now."

"It is your fight against the Czar of Sunset. I see!" exclaimed the old miner. "But we are his captives, for this underground nest is a prison."

"We will now try to elude the death that besets us as Captain Flash's prisoners," answered Sandy Sam. "We must go over the ground again and not think of Hugh Holloway until we first have opened the doors of this subterranean cage for ourselves."

Once more the two men started down the passage, and Rube Ransom, after threading several corridors which terminated abruptly, stopped and cried out:

"The voice again! I heard it just then. It is straight ahead!"

"Forward, then!"

Rube moved on with one hand doubled behind his ear and in the other a cocked six-shooter.

"To the right!" exclaimed Sandy Sam.

"The other unfortunate is not far away." Into the passage leading to the right darted the two friends, and Rube halted as he came upon the edge of what appeared to be a bottomless pit.

At the same moment the improvised torch went out, leaving the pair in Cimmerian blackness.

"We must wait for another cry," said the miner.

"I am here! I am in the pit of the nabob. I am Hugh Holloway, doomed to die here by Captain Flash, the land pirate of Montana."

"I told yer so!" exclaimed Rube. "It's Hugh, and livin'!"

In a moment the resolute old miner was leaning over the edge of the abyss, with Sandy Sam, trying to illuminate the pit with a pair of blazing matches.

Hugh Holloway was seen standing against the wall at the bottom of the pit, and the two friends overhead gazed at him a little while in silence.

Rube uttered a shout of joy and fairly danced on the very fringe of the abyss.

"Hark!" he suddenly cried, as he whirled and clutched Sandy Sam's sleeve. "We are attacked in the rear."

Shadow Sam turned with his revolver and braced himself against the wall.

He tried to pierce the darkness that stretched before them, but failed.

"It's the yellow viper for a million!" exclaimed Rube. "The yellow tool of Captain Flash is back yonder. He knows all the crooks and turns in this underground hell. He—"

The sentence was broken by the report of a pistol, and the bunch of matches blazing in Shadow Sam's hand fell to the ground.

The bullet had struck the bunch, scattering the fire and again rendering their surroundings darkness itself.

Sam without a word sprang down the corridor, pistol in hand, and heard footsteps in the blackness ahead.

All at once he stopped, raised the revolver, and fired.

Out of the gloom ahead came a sharp cry, like that of a man mortally stricken, and the Shadow Sport smiled.

The reports had filled the place with weird echoes and a confusion of sounds, and while the trailer listened Rube touched his arm.

"You winged the yellow cat!" he cried. "I heard him cry out."

"He is down yonder."

For half a second the old miner hesitated, and then bounded away.

Shadow Sam waited.

Presently there came to his ears a strange sound which sent him down the corridor.

It seemed to end in a demoniac laugh, and died away far down in the earth.

The Shadow Sport brought up against a rocky wall, and recoiled with an exclamation of horror.

The collision had stunned him, and for a little while he stood in the gloom like a man in a maze.

He struck his last match and held it over his head.

"Rube?" he called. "Rube, are you here?"

The answer was a deathly silence that went to his heart and seemed to unnerve him.

In vain did he search the vicinity of his halting place, but he saw something on a stone that glistened, and he touched it, only to withdraw his hand and find it bloody.

No signs of a struggle were visible in the dust of years that had accumulated on the floor of the passage-way; no signs of either Rube or Centipede.

Mystified, the western ferret turned back. He made his way to the edge of the pit—Hugh Holloway's prison, and leaned over it.

"Holloway? Holloway?" he called.

His words came back in torturing echo, nothing more.

Shadow Sam was more than puzzled. It was a new mystery.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LIVELY WIFE HUNT.

Certain that the Sport from Frisco was secured beyond all escape for the present, Captain Flash had set out upon his bride hunt.

The cunning escape of Effie, the Windflower of Sunset, on the eve of her marriage, irritated the nabob a great deal, and especially when he thought he saw in it the hand of Montana Maude.

The woman who had been his friend so long had turned against him with all a woman's vengeance.

Maude had been Effie's guardian, even helping on the wooing; but now she had

turned the tables on him and he found in her a person as cunning and cool as the best of them.

Fiery Flash might have disposed of Sandy Sam in the house as well as left him bound in the chair, but he had another object in view, and then he thought that Centipede would return to the place and perhaps dispose of the Shadow Sport, or at least see that his imprisonment was not disturbed.

With six of his tools behind him, for there was a possibility of meeting the Twins in the mountains, Captain Flash felt able to cope with the two fugitives whose trail he did not expect would prove very troublesome.

A few hours after the meeting of the women and Taos and Tophet on the mountain the hunters might have been seen gradually advancing down a narrow path in single file.

Captain Flash, eager and a little flushed, led the party, and weapons were ready for use at a moment's notice.

The country was wild and picturesque and the cavalcade admired it, though they had seen it a thousand times.

All at once the men drew rein, for Captain Flash had just done so, and looked ahead.

The Czar of Sunset gazed ahead, but could not see anything.

Suddenly, however, there stepped into the trail not twenty yards away the well-known figures of the Golden Twins.

The men behind Captain Flash looked at one another and then bestowed their glances upon their leader.

Like statues the Twins blocked further advance, their burly forms silhouetted against the darker gray of the rocks behind them and their bronzed faces seamed with defiance.

"Sho!" exclaimed Captain Flash. "We meet you again, do we? How goes it in the hills?"

Taos threw up one hand and displayed the bracelet he always wore at the right wrist.

"You know the way back, captain," said he. "This is forbidden ground."

"Forbidden to whom?" flashed the nabob. "This is the free country of the hills—free for all who invade it. It belongs to no man—"

"It is our ground!" was the interruption. "It belongs to Taos and Tophet, the Twins o' Tartarus."

Captain Flash laughed derisively, and threw a quick look at his followers.

He doubted not that the Twins were guarding the retreat of his prey, and for a moment he bit his lips in silence.

"I say this is no man's ground," he cried. "Stand aside! You can't strangle all of us."

The brothers did not move, but seemed to plant themselves more firmly on the ground.

Captain Flash grew white.

"Ready!" he said in a whisper over his shoulders, and instantly weapons moved behind him.

But at the same time a pair of revolvers were lifted down the trail and over the barrels gleamed the eyes of the Golden Twins.

"It's the old game—good enough for more than one!" said Taos. "You advance on your peril, Captain Flash."

Never before, perhaps, had Kiddled Eric been thus brought to bay.

He recalled his old life in the Land of the Mad Lariats; but nothing of this sort had ever happened there.

No wonder he bit his nether lip.

"It's a trick to give them time," he hissed, with another glance at his men.

"The Twins have turned rearguard; they are in the pay of Montana Maude, the traitress!"

"We are in no one's pay," was the rejoinder from Taos, who had caught Captain Flash's words. "We are the free spirits of the High Hills, and woe to the man who disputes our right, whoever he be, king or serf!"

"We kin ride 'em down, cap'n," said a confident voice behind the nabob.

Captain Flash hesitated.

"Give the signal. They'll go down under our horses' hoofs like weeds."

Still he held back, but his heart was in the proposed dash.

"You are keeping me from lawful quest," continued the captain. "Beyond you hides the woman who has turned traitor to me and mine."

A smile passed over the bearded faces before them, but the figures blocked the trail as before.

A swift glance passed from Taos to Tophet, and the next moment the Twins parted, stepping one to each side of the narrow trail.

"Pass," said Taos, waving his hand toward Captain Flash. "Pass, if you kin!"

It was an invitation that savored of death, and no one knew it better than those who heard it.

The dark hands of the Twins still clutched their revolvers, and their eyes as well as the weapons covered the men from Sunset.

Captain Flash looked at the brothers, but held back.

"You don't want ter pass?" said Taos.

"We are going ter pass. We intend to invade the heart of this recess and recover the prisoners."

"Beauty and booty, eh?" laughed the Twin. "Well, Cap'n Flash, this is the old business, or like it. How goes the times in old Lariat Land?"

"To perdition with you!" was the answer. "Come, boys!"

The last words were spoken to his followers and reins were lifted in unison, but at the same time the hands down the trail seemed to move a little.

"Make sure work of them! We've been cursed by these mountain devils long enough!" cried Captain Flash.

In another moment seven men seemed to drop to the necks of their steeds and shot toward the Twins like as many arrows.

Crack, crack went two revolvers, and as many Sunseters sprang upright, to pitch forward and drop from their horses.

Captain Flash, unharmed, rode straight toward the shooting brothers, his weapon in his hand and levelled.

He fired point-blank at Taos' bosom, to see that worthy reel against a rock, while Tophet sent a bullet spinning through his (the captain's) hat.

In another instant the men from Sunset had passed the point, and were reining in their horses some distance from the battle-ground.

It was a mad dash and a quick one. It had begun and ended in a second, and, with victory in his eye, Captain Flash filled his saddle, the pistol still in his hand.

On the ground at the big gray rock lay two figures that stirred not, and as he looked up the trail Captain Flash started.

"Only two?" he said above his breath. "I sent Taos against the rock dead; but I don't see him now."

Grim visaged, the men of Sunset rode back, and Captain Flash uttered a cry at the gray rock.

Taos was not to be seen, and no one but the two Sunseters lay where the fight had taken place.

In vain did the men look for the Twins; they had vanished as completely as if the ground had engulfed them.

"Come! Let the dead be!" shouted Captain Flash. "The quarry is near. We have flushed the birds, and quick work will secure them."

Away went the band, and far up the mountain they drew rein for a breathing spell.

A part of this time they were closely watched by the couple whom they hunted, for Montana Maude and Effie, concealed by a wall of natural rock, stood side by side, wondering if the trailers would find them.

"We are lost," said the fair girl, looking up into her companion's face. "Why not go back and let fate play out its hand?"

"What, play into the hands of the vulture down there?" was the instant reply. "You have fled from the bridal. Do you want to return in chains to Sunset and become the wife of Kidded Eric of the Land of the Mad Lariats?"

"But what is ahead of us?" asked Effie, in despairing tones. "I have trusted you. You said we would find a hiding place in these hills—one which Captain Flash and his minions could not discover. We have found nothing as yet."

Maude turned aside her face to conceal its expression from the Wind-flower, but in another instant she looked into Effie's eyes.

"If you insist, it shall be surrender," she said, lowering her voice. "We will go down yonder and meet them."

Effie of Sunset recoiled with a shudder, and then drew closer to Maude.

"I dare not," said she. "I cannot return and become the wife of Captain Flash while Hugh lives."

"Ah, Hugh!" ejaculated Maude. "Hugh came to the eagle's nest to find you, girl."

"And where is he now?"

"In the nest yet."

"He may have felt the eagle's talons."

"That is true. Hugh may be in the bird's cage at this time for your sake, girl. Shall we go down now?"

"No! no!" cried Effie.

"They cannot reach us for some time even if they should strike the trail we broke on the flinty rocks," continued Montana Maude. "The Twins did not stop them very long. The shots we heard were in our behalf, and Taos and Tophet delivered them."

"Not all," said Effie. "The trail of the Twins of Tartarus may have ended down yonder."

For a moment Montana Maude was silent, her gaze flitting over the ground beneath them, as if she would find the Twins, their friends now in the hour of need.

Meanwhile Captain Flash and his band were following their trail, now and then hidden from view by rock and tree, but at the same time pushing on up the mountain with the certainty of fate.

Effie looked at the woman beside her and saw her face darken.

"Stand here, girl," said Maude. "Don't, as you value life itself, quit this place."

"What would you do?"

"Wait and see."

Maude tore herself from the Wind-flower and crept away.

The breathless Effie watched her as she glided forward, shielding her lithe body from view to those below, and moving on with the noiselessness of the panther.

Montana Maude crept over the ground before their retreat and vanished.

Effie waited for her reappearance some distance down the mountain, and fastened her gaze on a certain spot where she felt assured the woman would stop.

Suddenly her attention was called to a man on horseback who leaned from the saddle as he pointed at the ground.

He was some distance away, but his figure was recognized by the hunted beauty of Montana, and for a little while she gazed at Captain Flash on his black steed.

She leaned forward in her eagerness to catch the words he must be speaking to his men; but they did not float up to her ear.

"They've found our trail!" said she under her breath, as she watched Captain Flash. "The Twins failed to keep them at bay and Maude will have to surrender at last."

Even while Effie spoke the man on the black steed straightened in his saddle and threw a look toward her.

Effie cranked behind the wall with a shudder, as if she had been discovered, but the next moment she looked again.

"They come!" she cried. "Where is Maude?"

Fear urged flight, but devotion to her protector held her back.

"I see him plainer now than before," she went on, once more catching sight of Captain Flash. "We can no more elude him than we can cleave the upper heavens."

Then she seemed lifted from the ground, for a weapon had spoken down the mountain side, and the rider of the black horse dropped like a dead man in the saddle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEMAND FOR BLOOD.

It was night again when a little band of horsemen rode into Sunset and drew rein in the square.

One of these riders, in fact the man who headed the cavalcade, carried his right arm in a sling, fashioned out of a sash, and after separating from his followers he rode to Captain Flash's house.

It was the captain himself, a little pale, but with a determined gleam in his eyes, and irritated.

The bride hunter had come back to Sunset without the bird from the mountain nest.

Dismounting and glancing up at the house Captain Flash crossed the threshold and entered the main room.

Everything seemed all right there, but something startled him.

Near the desk stood a large arm-chair and on the floor at its legs lay several pieces of rope.

Captain Flash understood the meaning of this at once.

"They've rescued him!" he said under his breath. "Some one has saved Sandy Sam from the South."

He looked around the room and then touched a bell on the table, sending through the whole house, as it seemed, its clear tones.

Captain Flash grew more and more restless while he waited, for he suddenly sprang up and left the room.

"What's become of Centipede?" he exclaimed, coming back after a brief hunt. "Where's the yellow cat I brought to Sunset, sworn to stand by me to the end?"

This time he was answered, for Centipede presented himself and uttered a sharp cry when he noticed the crippled arm.

"Where is he?" said Captain Flash, pointing at the empty chair.

A Satanic grin suffused Centipede's face, and he laughed.

"You know, do you? You set him free?"

"I did not. Another did, but they got the worst of it."

"Who freed Sandy Sam?"

"Rube, the old miner."

"Where are they?"

"In the death-trap."

"Alive?"

"Alive, but lost," cried the little man.

"You met some one in the mountain?"

Captain Flash slightly raised his bandaged arm and grated his teeth as he looked at it.

"Never mind that," he said to Centipede. "That's a story which will keep. Show me the prisoners."

"Rube and Sandy Sam?"

"Yes. Where are they?—in the trap? I want to know."

Instead of obeying, Centipede came forward until he reached the table, where he stopped and looked down into his master's face.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"In the mountain."

"You did not find the trail, then?"

"We found the trail, but we didn't bring them back."

"Was she with Montana Maude?"

"With the traitress, yes," and here followed another look at the wounded arm. "They were together. We found both."

"But they fought, eh?"

"Maude fought, and both vanished."

Captain Flash snapped out his answers

in no enviable mood, and Centipede suddenly switched off to another subject.

"I have them in the trap like that," he laughed as he shut his hand as if crushing an egg-shell. "They are both down there, safe, safe!"

"And Hugh Holloway?"

"Just like the other two."

Captain Flash crossed the floor with nervous strides.

"I would see them," he said, glancing back at Centipede. "You have them in the trap; but I want proof."

Centipede lifted the trap door in the floor and the two men went down, the yellow-skinned viper in the lead.

"I don't see how you trapped both of them here," said the nabob of Sunset.

"It's a story that will keep, ha, ha," laughed the little villain. "It was just the slickest trick ever played in Sunset or under it."

Captain Flash did not reply, but followed the figure that glided in advance of him.

"You remember the round pit near the lake, cap'n?" suddenly exclaimed Centipede.

"The pit from which there is no outlet?"

"Yes."

"How can I forget it, Centipede?"

"I thought so. Well, we'll find them there."

"Cooped up for life?"

"Just so. It was the slickest trick ever played under ground. I did it all myself and I left 'em there awhile ago."

Captain Flash patted Centipede on the shoulder with the uninjured hand.

"You're worth your weight in diamonds, Centipede. I owe you more than you think."

"It was a lie, then?"

Captain Flash looked curiously at the yellowish face revealed by the light and asked himself if Centipede were losing his senses.

"It was all a lie about you leavin' me that night to my fate in the canyon?"

A change came over the desperado's face, but he forced back his old calmness.

"Oh, that night in the old canyon? I remember. We had a time in the storm; but fortune stood by us."

"Fortune, cap'n? Yes, yes. It must have been fortune, and the man who said otherwise in yon room told a lie."

"Who said I tried to abandon you?"

"Sandy Sam."

Captain Flash laughed in Centipede's face and ended abruptly.

"And you believed him? You let him sow the seed of distrust in your heart?"

"But he saved me the night we had the tussle with the greasers at Crimson Valley ranch."

"Did he say so?"

"Jove! he proved it. I remember how the horse started up the moment I was thrown across the saddle by the unknown deliverer, and he remembered it, too."

"All that is a pretty story, Centipede. It was told for a purpose. He simply wanted to turn you against me—to bring the knife to his bonds. But show me the birds in the cage."

Centipede ran glibly down the underground corridor and stopped at last to wait for the less agile captain to come up.

"A light, cap'n," said the yellow man. A match blazed up and Captain Flash held it over the pit.

"They're not there!" he cried.

"But I left them in the pit. Thar's no outlet."

"Where are they, then?"

Poor Centipede seemed to feel great drops of sweat come out on his forehead.

"You must go down," said the captain sternly.

"Into the Round Pit?"

"Yes; go back and get a rope."

Centipede went back and presently returned with a lariat which he sullenly began to uncoil.

Captain Flash lent some assistance

with his good hand, and in a short time everything was in readiness for Centipede's descent.

"In the light of the match I threw down into the pit," said the nabob, "I thought I detected a fissure that was not there the last time I came down here. The earthquake of last summer may have destroyed the Round Pit's usefulness as a prison."

Centipede let himself carefully over the edge of the abyss and, carrying a naked knife between his teeth, lowered himself, hand over hand.

In a few moments his voice came up to the man above, announcing his arrival at the bottom.

"Now, strike a match!" said the nabob.

Centipede did so, and the captain saw his figure by its light.

"It is true!" suddenly cried the yellow man. "There is a large rent in the rock."

"Large enough to let your body in?"

"Yes, yes."

"The birds are out of your cage, Centipede. After all, you could not have befriended them more."

A mad oath came up from Centipede's lips, and Captain Flash, waiting in the darkness, smiled to himself.

"Follow the trail. See where it leads," he commanded.

"It may lead to death."

"Remember your oath, man. You belong to me. You have been saved thrice by my hand, and you swore to do my bidding without question. Follow the trail!"

Centipede threw the match to the ground with a cry of rage.

The look he sent upward was not detected by the man there, and, clutching the hilt of the knife in his right hand, Centipede stepped into the opening.

Having waited five minutes for his return, Captain Flash drew away from the fringe of the Round Pit and retraced his steps.

Perhaps he thought Centipede would report in time, and so he made his way back to the room of so many events in the house behind the pines.

He walked in and threw himself into the chair at the table, where he scowled as if the recollection of the unsuccessful mountain hunt still rankled in his bosom.

"Golddust George won't come back empty handed," he exclaimed. "He will find them. He will stick to the trail if it leads through the outskirts of hades. And then—then—Some one's coming now!"

He looked toward the door, for his keen ear had caught a sound beyond the threshold and it opened to admit a miner in the mountain blouse.

The wearer of the blouse, a tall, gaunt, red-headed man with great whitish marks on his hands, strode forward and thrusting those same hands into his pockets, exclaimed:

"They want the man what killed Robinet out thar!"

Captain Flash looked the fellow over from head to foot and seemed to smile incredulously.

"They want the man who killed Robinet, you say, Maddocks? Why, he's not here."

"But they saw him come here last. They want Centipede out thar. It's business, Cap'n."

"Oh, they accuse Centipede of the crime, do they? That's some of Sherlock's work."

"True, Sandy Sam first accused Centipede, but they've got evidence."

"Of what sort?"

"They measured the tracks in the ground where Montana Maud found Robinet. Thar's a cross in one of the soles, and you know, and so do all Sunset, that Centipede wears a cross on his soles."

For a moment Captain Flash seemed struck dumb, as he recalled the examination of his own boot sole by Sandy Sam.

"Centipede is not here," he said.

"Well, they want him. It's gettin' warm out yonder."

"But he's my man."

Maddocks came a little nearer, his face getting red as he seemed to swallow hard:

"Better one than two," he said in a whisper.

"They don't say that, do they?"

"Yes."

Captain Flash rose and looked the messenger squarely in the eye:

"Tell them—"

He did not get to finish, for the door behind him opened and the glance Maddocks shot in that direction told him who was there.

"Thar's the victim. Centipede, they want you in the plaza for killin' Robinet!" Maddocks exclaimed.

The yellow man seemed to turn white.

"Take him," coolly said Captain Flash. "Better one than two, you say. I shield no murderer."

Centipede drew his knife and showed his vicious-looking teeth.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SHADOW OF DOOM.

Centipede had not had time to report the results of his trip through the unexplored portions of the mine before he was ordered into the hands of the avengers by Captain Flash.

He looked dazed when he gazed at the nabob of Sunset and for a moment did not find his tongue.

Maddocks waited for Centipede to advance, but as he did not the miner stepped forward.

Centipede clutched the knife with a firmer grip and again drew back against the wall.

He showed his teeth like a vicious dog.

"You don't mean that, cap'n," he said.

"If you really killed Robinet, yes. You heard what Maddocks says."

"But it's false!"

"Go with him out there and prove it."

But Centipede made no move toward the miner, and Captain Flash looked away.

"It's one or two," said Maddocks.

"The boys say so."

The next moment, with a spring that would not have discredited a tiger, the yellow man came forward and dropped at the table at the nabob's side.

"I found the trail beyond the fissure in the wall of the Round Pit," said he, lowering his voice.

"Well?"

"I followed it till I lost it. They are no longer in the mine."

Captain Flash seemed to start and his cheeks lost a trifle in color.

"Sandy Sam and Rube have escaped," Centipede went on. "Captain, you will need every arm in Sunset now."

The master spirit of the camp looked toward Maddocks.

"He shall face the crowd in a short time," he said, waving his hand at Centipede. "I will vouch for him."

"They won't wait long, captain. The men of Sunset are eager to avenge the death of Robinet."

"It shall be avenged. Go and tell them so, Maddocks."

Slowly the messenger of the vigilantes turned and reluctantly he walked toward the door.

"They won't send me back any more," he said. "They'll come themselves."

In a moment he was gone, and the two left in the room turned simultaneously on one another.

"Has it come to this?" asked Captain Flash.

"Let the dogs bark," answered Centipede. "They won't show their teeth long."

"But this must not be. It puts off the hour of my triumph, and you, Centipede, may lose a wife."

The little man shrugged his shoulders:

"If you mean Montana Maude," said he, with a diabolic grin, "let her go."

"She has gone. She and Effie are in the mountains, but Golddust George and others are on their trail, and in a few

hours at best we will see the birds back in the cage."

It was evident that Centipede did not relish the idea of seeing Maude back in Sunset, for he said nothing in reply to Captain Flash's last words, but looked down the pine-bordered walk which ended at the Plaza.

"You lost the trail, you say," suddenly questioned the nabob.

"Yes."

"Where did it terminate?"

"Where the little corridor runs into the larger one."

"And you saw nothing beyond it?"

"Nothing."

"Let us investigate."

"What?" cried Centipede, recoiling a step. "Go back into that den of darkness?"

"Yes, and now."

Centipede thought of the men of Sunset and of Maddock's report; they could not find him in the labyrinthine passages of the mine and drag him to the noose.

"Come!" he cried. "We'll search the mine, captain. Take your weapons."

Once more the nabob and his man were in the heart of the strange mine underneath the house behind the trees.

Centipede led the way to the spot where he had lost the trail, and with a light in his hand he stooped and illumined the ground at his feet.

"Look!" he said, looking up into Captain Flash's eager face. "It ends here."

The nabob of Sunset looked a moment and shook his head.

"But it goes on," said he. "It cannot end here. You know that much, Centipede."

"Where are the tracks beyond this point?"

"True, they appear to be lost, but we will pick up the trail again."

They hastened down the narrowest corridor and suddenly Captain Flash looked into his companion's face.

"What's that?" he said, pointing at the ground.

"The trail again," was the reply. "We've found it, cap'n."

The pair pushed on, each step carrying them nearer the entrance to the mine, and at length they stopped perplexed.

"Tell me," said Captain Flash, "how you managed to decoy Sandy Sam and Rube here?"

"I was guiding them, you know," he grinned. "They but half trusted me, and I knew it. All at once I left them and they had to shift for themselves. By and by I sneaked back like a cat, Captain, and shot out Sandy Sam's torch. Then all was darkness, but I heard him start after me. Suddenly the report of his weapon filled the cavern with a thousand echoes and I felt a pain in my arm. I knew I was hit, but not hard."

"Presently I heard Rube coming down the corridor after me. I waited for him and sent him against the wall with his throat in my clutch. The Round Pit wasn't far off, and I dragged the old fellow thither and tumbled him over the edge of it. But I was not to lose Sandy Sam. He had relighted his torch and was coming after me. But it was the easiest thing in the world to slip behind a rock and wait for him. It was just as easy to spring out and dash the torch from his hands and then, before he could fight me off, throw him after Rube."

"He caught on the fringe of the Round Pit and hung there," continued Centipede. "I feared for a second that he would regain his footing, so I tore his hands loose and let him drop to his pard. It was all over in less than ten minutes, but while it lasted my blood was hot."

"Did you go back to see how the other bird in the cage came on?" asked Captain Flash.

"Hugh Holloway?"

"Yes."

"I did not."

"Let us see."

The couple turned back, and in a short time Captain Flash leaned over a circular pit and threw into it the light of the torch in his hands.

"Another mystery!" said he. "Hugh is out of the cage."

"No! no!" cried Centipede. "It cannot be."

"You have eyes; look for yourself."

Centipede, at the Captain's side, shaded his eyes and gazed into the pit.

"It is true."

"Do you want to go down and see?"

"No."

"Very well. He is not there, and it matters little how the bird left the cage. He is gone and we—"

Centipede clutched Captain Flash's arm and broke the sentence.

With the other hand he pointed down the underground corridor and breathed hard.

"I heard them down yonder," he said in a whisper. "What if they are all there?"

The nabob of Sunset listened, but could not hear a suspicious sound and shook off Centipede's hand.

"The battle will be waged above ground!" he cried. "They are out of the mine."

"And what is to become of me? You promised Maddocks that I should stand before the vigilante court of the camp."

"Are you guilty?"

The piercing gaze of Captain Flash seemed to transfix his companion and Centipede looked away.

"Did you kill Robinet?" he cried.

"Why should I kill him?"

"Fool! dolt!" exclaimed Captain Flash. "Can't you beat down your tiger nature? Would you imperil our chances in Sunset for the pleasure of murdering?"

There was no reply; Centipede only looked at the speaker and shrank against the wall.

"No wonder they want you," continued Captain Flash. "They must have proof."

"But you told me to poison their minds against Sandy Sam," whined Centipede.

"So I did, but I did not know that you killed the old man."

"You promised me in the Land of the Mad Lariats that you would never desert me, but would stand by me through thick and thin. I hold you to that promise, cap'n."

"I never looked for an emergency of this kind. You heard Maddock. 'One or both,' he said."

"But the castle is ours. The house can be fortified, and in this den of darkness, whose secrets belong to us alone, we can hide forever. You don't intend to turn Centipede over to the men of the camp?"

"We'll see. Come. Back to the house! The crisis has arrived."

Captain Flash led the way back and burst into the room where he had met Maddocks.

"Look yonder," he said coolly, as he turned upon Centipede after a glance from the window. "Maddocks has reported."

The yellow man gave one look and recoiled with but little color in his face.

Suddenly, as if imbued with the desperation of a cornered tiger, he bounded to the door and laid his hand on the heavy iron bolt.

Captain Flash watched him with a comical expression and saw him shoot the bolt with eagerness.

"They're coming up the walk," the nabob said. "Those men are the self-constituted court of the camp—the court which I, with all my authority, have never been able to control."

"But you won't turn me over to them?"

"Maddocks said one or both of us. You heard him, Centipede?"

The stalwart figures in the walk outside loomed up before the little man like ghosts from doomland.

He looked around the room like a trapped rabbit.

Once he seemed on the eve of darting through the rear door to the trap-door in the floor of the adjoining room, but something held him back.

"Don't open that door," he suddenly cried, facing Captain Flash again. "On your life don't shoot back the bolt. Czar and nabob though you are, if you touch the bolt, I'll kill you in your boots."

The long, thin-bladed knife which glistened in Centipede's hand looked more dangerous than his mien and he faced his master like a demon incarnate.

"I believe Sandy Sam," he cried. "I believe now that you abandoned me that night in the canyon—that you stole my horse and left me to perish there. When you think you can dispense with the services of Centipede you are ready to leave him to the wolves and the vultures. Hands off that bolt, cap'n. One or both, eh? It shall not be Centipede without you are with him. They're at the door now. Silver Saul is the leader. I know him, merciless, and a man who would sooner it war Captain Flash. Yes, open the door. I'm ready."

Captain Flash obeyed, and as the door opened, revealing the assembled avengers, the hand of Centipede covered his master.

"Thar he is!" he shouted. "That's the man who killed Robinet!"

CHAPTER XX.

A LIAR IN YELLOW.

About the time of the occurrences last narrated, three men, well mounted, rode down a spur in the mountain, having in charge two women, who looked dejected.

In brief, Golddust George, the high sheriff of Sunset, and his little posse had come upon Montana Maude and Effie and had taken them unawares.

With their faces turned once more toward the camp from which one had run off and the other departed with the degree of outlawry against her, they were not in a happy mood, and if the reader could have seen the cavalcade and looked at it closely he would have observed that Maude's hands had been secured.

She, at least, was feared by the high sheriff, but as for Effie, she was not considered so dangerous, for she rode beside Montana Maude unfettered.

Golddust George, a little proud of his success, rode at the head of the band, and now and then threw watchful glances at the captives, as if to make sure that Montana Maude had not given them the slip.

Nearly all the time the roofs of Sunset were in sight, but now and then, owing to some bend in the trail, they momentarily vanished.

Effie's face was pale, and for some time she had rode on in silence, but at last she leaned toward Maude and said in low tones:

"If you killed him, Maude, we'll have to answer for it."

"I will answer; not you, child," was the reply.

"But you know him."

"I do. I'm sorry to say that I've known Captain Flash for years. Don't let that matter trouble you. I am accountable for what I've done, and Sunset will not dare to punish you for the work of Montana Maude's trigger."

At this moment Golddust George dropped back to the two captives and the Wind-flower turned to him.

"Will you tell me now?" said the girl, "what is to follow her return to Sunset?"

She glanced at Maude as she spoke, and the bronzed miner's gaze flitted in the same direction.

"Let the future answer that," replied the high sheriff. "It's not for me to answer, I'm sure."

"Did—did she hit him hard?"

"You know it, then, do you?"

"Yes. I could not help knowing it, you see."

"Did you see the shooting, girl?"

"I heard the shot. I could not see Maude. I saw a man throw up his hands."

"That was the captain," said George. "It was a cool bit of work—a bad shot for her."

He nodded toward Maude, whose face was turned away, but whose ears were on the alert.

"Is he dead?"

"Not quite that bad, but he wants Maude, you see, my dear."

"What will he do with her?"

George gently shook his head.

"That's for the future to find out for you."

"He won't dare to—" Effie paused and looked into the bearded face of her escort.

"She's outlawed now," she finished. "He's already outlawed Montana Maude—"

"That makes it worse," was the interruption. "You know what we do, as a rule, with outlaws."

Effie did, and she kept silence as they rode along.

Presently they came in view of Sunset not more than a mile away, and Golddust George came back again.

"Do you want to become the captain's bride?" he asked.

The girl flushed and then her face lost color.

"Do you think I would have run away if the bridal was at all pleasing to me?"

"That's a fact. I don't believe you would. And Maude, yonder; does she care for Centipede?"

"What, for the yellow viper who stings whenever Captain Flash lifts a finger?"

"Yes."

"She detests him!"

"Just what I thought, too," was the response. "He'll make her a wife now."

"Centipede's wife? Heaven help that wretch if Captain Flash tries to force Maude to become his companion."

"That's just what he'll delight in doing. As for you, miss, he's fixed matters up to suit himself, and unless you can get out of the mess somehow, two weddings will occur down yonder."

Golddust George rode in advance again and Effie drew nearer to Montana Maude.

"You heard us?" she said in a low voice.

"Every word, child."

"What shall we do?"

"Keep on. Don't try to escape. Golddust George means well enough, but he's Captain Flash's high sheriff, and cannot kick out of the traces."

Effie looked away and down into the straggling street of Sunset.

"Never mind me," repeated Montana Maude. "They haven't fully chained the eagle yet."

The girl said no more, but turned again in her saddle and watched the cabins of Sunset with a melancholy eye.

Some one on the plaza caught sight of the cavalcade the moment it struck the street, and before it had advanced fifty yards further as many men swarmed the square.

Golddust George and his men rode suddenly but resolutely forward and halted in front of Effie's home.

The high sheriff dismounted and helped the Wind-flower of Sunset to the ground, after which he turned to Montana Maude.

"Not here!" he said, replying to the eager look Maude gave the door. "You've got a shanty of your own, you know."

They escorted Montana Maude a little further down the street and the high sheriff again dropped to the ground.

It was in front of Maude's shanty and her eyes seemed to light up with resolution the moment she glanced at it.

She was assisted to the ground and Golddust George escorted her inside where he left her, saying:

"It's orders, you see. You will get the free use of your hands by and bye, I hope; but just now the captain thinks it's best otherwise."

Maude seemed to draw her figure up an inch and her bosom heaved with illy suppressed excitement; but before she could address Golddust George he was gone.

"Gods! what's that?" cried the high sheriff as he caught sight of a lot of men who appeared on the square the

moment he emerged from the woman's cabin.

"They've got both the captain and Centipede in tow," said some one.

"It's the court of Sunset."

Golddust George came a little closer, when Silver Saul waved him back.

"What's up?" asked George, addressing the high officer of the court.

"Captain Flash has been taken as the murderer of Robinet. He denies the charge, and he shall be heard."

"And that little bunch of yellow bones?" cried the high sheriff.

"He's the accuser," said Silver Saul.

"Who else is against the captain?"

"No one."

"And the court took Captain Flash on the word of that viper?"

"We had no other word, and Robinet lies in his shanty now, murdered."

"All Sunset knows that."

"Captain Flash is willing to be tried," said Silver Saul. "He shall have a fair trial."

"Of course. What about Sandy Sam? When I went away you wanted him?"

"We can't find him. He has left Sunset, and the blood of Robinet calls for justice."

"On the oath of that yellow reptile? Never!"

Captain Flash waved his hand at Golddust George and stepped boldly forward.

"They'll give me a show," he said. "I'm not afraid of the outcome. It's a case of desperation with the real criminal. I have demanded an immediate trial and the court has promised it."

Golddust George and his friends acquiesced and the column moved toward the Winged Lazarus, where Captain Flash stepped upon the porch and turned toward the crowd below.

Centipede was held back by a bronzed hand, and the little man glared at his old master with the visage of a thug.

"Now! I demand a trial now!" cried Captain Flash. "For the honor of Sunset and my own, I demand it without delay."

Golddust George, at all times faithful to his master and Czar, came closer and one hand touched his hip as he glanced at Centipede, now and then showing his teeth in a vicious manner.

"Whar ar' your witnesses?" he asked Silver Saul. "Is Centipede the only one?"

"Yes—as far as we know."

"Put him on the stand, then."

Some one pushed Centipede into more prominence, and for half a second the little man stood apart from every one.

He knew that the eyes of all were upon him; he saw the keen glance shot at him from Captain Flash, and he looked appealingly for help, but found no sympathy.

Even the avengers of Robinet did not look merciful, as if all had deserted him.

Golddust George stepped toward Centipede and the yellow man recoiled, but immediately braced himself anew.

"What do you know?" asked the self-appointed counsel.

Not more than five feet separated Golddust George and Centipede; the long arms of the high sheriff could have touched him without much effort.

Centipede ground his teeth.

"It was his work," he said.

"Whar's your proof?"

"I saw him."

"You? When?"

"In the night."

"Liar!" roared Golddust George. "But go on. Tell us all about it, and, on your life, tell the truth!"

Once more, like the cornered rabbit, Centipede looked for an avenue of escape.

Fate, if not death, hemmed him in, and his roving eye seemed to grow lusterless as it failed to find the open door.

"Come! Be quick! A liar hesitates; a perjurer stammers and sweats blood. You are bleeding now on your hands."

It was true; the sharp nails of the yellow man had cut through his skin and drawn the crimson; he looked down at the exuding drops and then at Golddust George.

In another moment he seemed to take a long breath and then launched himself forward.

He eluded Golddust George, whose hand swept out after him, and the next instant he was past the circle.

Like a bolt hurled from a cross-bow, the figure of Centipede shot across the plaza.

Fifty men whipped out their weapons and whirled upon the fugitive witness.

Centipede was making the supreme effort of his life; he went over the ground like a jack-rabbit.

"Riddle him—make a sieve out of him!" cried Golddust George.

The fifty weapons were lifted, but not a trigger was pressed, for there had stepped between Centipede and death—between the court and its main witness—a man at whom all stared in silence—Sandy Sam, the Shadow Sport.

CHAPTER XXI.

TAMPERING WITH THE COURT.

Captain Flash was one of the most interested of the spectators, and he stared at Sandy Sam with the mien of one truly astonished.

Centipede had darted behind the unexpected actor, and was out of sight.

Perhaps he had thrown himself behind a shanty, and, keeping it between him and the court of Sunset, was making his way to the high hills.

The Frisco shadower, Sam, came on with the coolness of the born sport and halted in full view of the crowd.

"That's the man!" said he, covering Captain Flash with his forefinger. "Behold the assassin of Raper, the Miner!"

Captain Flash seemed to recoil, but his gaze immediately wandered to Golddust George and those who would back the high sheriff under all circumstances.

He got a signal in return, for he stepped suddenly to the front and held up his hand.

"Let the man yonder prove it," he said. "This is Sunset, the camp of fair play. If I am guilty of this charge, let the man out there make his words good."

That was all.

Sandy Sam stood apart from the men of Sunset and looked coolly over the crowd.

"Whenever Captain Flash faces the Court of Sunset I will make my words good. He knows I have the proof," and with this he mounted the porch of the Winged Lazarus and disappeared.

Golddust George, with a cocked six-shooter in his hand, turned after Sandy Sam, but the hand of Captain Flash stopped him.

"Wait! The man is in our hands," the nabob said. "He is our prey whenever we care to spring the trap."

The high sheriff stopped and some one said that Centipede ought to be followed and brought back.

This suggestion diverted the crowd from Captain Flash and his enemy, and in a little while a dozen determined men were on the yellow man's trail.

Captain Flash, back again in the house behind the pines, had Golddust George for a companion.

"Did you have much trouble in overhauling the birds?" the nabob asked.

"Not a great deal."

"Did Montana Maude show her teeth?"

"Only a little, but she really wishes she had more than winged you."

"There's no doubt of that."

"We did not meet the Twins, though the women expected to be rescued by them."

"They won't bother us again soon in Sunset. Taos and Tophet know it is death for them to enter here."

"They will go back to their old occu-

pation," said Golddust George. "They will hold up some stage in the mountains and add to their present good deeds."

Both men smiled a little.

"Now that Centipede's cleared out there's a chance for you, Golddust."

"For me?"

"Yes. She's not past forty, and is good looking."

"But I don't care for a woman like that."

"It would please me immensely. It would be punishing the traitress enough."

"And me, too."

"Come; as to that, you know you don't have to keep house in Sunset."

"I know; but the woman—the wife I would get."

"One of the best shots in Montana."

"Granted."

"One of the 'cleverest' women in the silver camps between here and Denver."

"She might have a say in the matter."

"How far would it go if I set my head contrariwise?" asked Captain Flash.

"Not very far, of course."

"Then consider it settled. You will come here at eight o'clock to-night and meet your bride."

Golddust George did not answer for half a minute and through his silence he was watched, hawk-like, by Captain Flash.

"Why not make a double wedding of it?" cried the nabob. "Why not have a quiet, but double ceremony?"

"Suit yourself."

"It shall be thus! Don't fail me, Golddust. At eight to-night. Two brides and two weddings! Sunset never had anything like this."

Captain Flash picked up a cigar and lit it, but Golddust George did not follow his example.

"When will you demand a trial?" he asked.

"After the wedding."

"Before the Court of Sunset?"

"Yes—before the merciless court itself, the only thing here I've never been able to control."

"Sandy Sam says he has the proofs."

"Nonsense! I am eager to know what sort of proofs he has trumped up."

"The man is a cool one. I can see that by his eye, and he is not easily beaten back."

"No. I realize his cunning, but it shall avail him nothing in this instance. Golddust, you must stand by me."

"Like a rock, captain."

"I'll make you a Prince of Silver. I'll make you the richest man besides myself in Montana."

"That's all right. I'm with you."

Captain Flash opened the secret door in the wall and came back to the table with a pocket-book in his hands.

Golddust George looked on and saw his master take from the pocket-book a bit of dark parchment which he spread out on the oil-cloth.

The miner's eyes got a gleam.

"That's the warrant for more riches than Sunset ever dreamed of," said Captain Flash.

"It's old Raper's secret?"

"It's nothing else, Golddust."

"I don't understand the lines and crosses, and if you have the key—"

"I can lay my hand on the key at any time. It's in my possession, or nearly so. Don't let the key worry you. The secret is mine, and the door of this vast treasure house is in my pathway."

"It's glorious! Now, this man from the coast must be put down!"

"Certainly. Sandy Sam is the stumbling block in our way, and he must be removed."

"I'll see that the Court is organized against him."

"Could you do that, Golddust?"

"Why not? Silver Saul is under obligations to me."

"Strong enough to work the whole Court?"

"I don't doubt it."

"Then, go to work now. Don't let a

spear of grass grow under your feet. See Silver Saul, and when you tell me that you have worked him, I'll demand the trial."

Golddust George rose and strode toward the door, his bronzed face turned toward the man in the chair.

"Don't fail me, Golddust," said Captain Flash.

"I never fail any one."

"You'll lose a wife if you do."

George laughed and vanished.

Five minutes later this man entered a shanty near the end of the long street and confronted Silver Saul.

For a moment the two men stood face to face without a word between them, and then Golddust George said:

"I've been thinking of the old cave in the Black Viper Mine. When was it, Saul?"

The other man started visibly and looked at his visitor.

"I don't like to think of it," he said.

"It was the closest call of my life."

"And of mine, too."

"You know what I owe you, Golddust."

"Don't mention it, Saul. I carried you out o' the death pit at the risk of my life, but that's all right. Don't mention the little circumstance."

"It doesn't lessen my gratitude," was the answer. "I never think of that night without thinking of your bravery."

Golddust George drew a little closer to the owner of the shanty and began his real play.

"What's this against the captain?" he asked. "You wouldn't have believed Centipede, eh?"

"We didn't want to."

"Of course not. Why would the captain want to kill Robinet? and this other charge—the most diabolical of all."

"Sandy Sam's?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

Silver Saul did not answer.

"We know he is the captain's enemy," continued Golddust George.

"I believe it."

"He's one of these spotters who invade the camps now and then and select the head man for their victim."

"He acknowledges that he is a detective."

"Just so, Saul. You never took to these fellows?"

"I never liked 'em, Golddust."

"And this one is no better than the common run o' mountain bloodhounds."

"I wish I knew that."

"Give me time and I'll overwhelm you with proof! Think of this monstrous charge against the captain. What proof has this man? What evidence, but some of his own making? Why should Captain Flash kill old Raper, the guardian of Effie, his promised bride? We must look at these things squarely, Saul. The honor of Sunset is at stake. We want to see both Robinet and Raper avenged; but we can't afford to take the unsupported word of this cool head."

"When will the captain demand a trial?"

"Whenever you insure him a fair one."

"He shall have that at any time."

"But this man's oath will bear with the Court unless you instruct the boys."

"I?"

Silver Saul looked half insulted.

"Do that, Saul, and the debt you contracted in the Black Viper Mine will be cancelled forever."

"But that would hardly be the fair thing."

"What would he do if he had the chance? He is here for blood. He cast about for a victim and settled on Captain Flash. I'll cancel the old debt, Saul, if you'll do the fair thing by me. See the boys who, with you, constitute the tribunal of Sunset. You can do it all. You know how."

"And if I see them the captain will demand a trial?"

"Yes. He will then demand it. But he don't want to be tried by a Court willing to believe the one witness."

Silver Saul arose and stood statue-like between Golddust George and the door.

The mountain tempter watched him eagerly as if much hung on what Saul would say.

"I'll see the boys," said Silver Saul at last.

Golddust held out his hand and the two men stood together for a brief spell.

"Make them all solid," said Golddust George. "There must be no blinder. It must be a solid verdict."

"Yes, yes."

"And the old debt will be cancelled. You told me then to ask for any favor, and I have never asked, eh, Saul?"

"No, never," and as the last sentence died away Golddust George went out, leaving the man he had corrupted to his own reflections, and chuckling to himself over the success of his mission.

CHAPTER XXII.

HUGH HOLLOWAY'S PLAY.

From the hour of her return to Sunset Montana Maude had a guard in front of her home.

The woman who had been outlawed by Captain Flash, only to be hunted and brought in from the high hills, stood near the door and appeared to be listening to the movements of the tall miner who had been placed on guard by Golddust George.

The day was about to close, for the sun was sinking behind the silver hills and long shadows of tree and shanty lay athwart the streets of Sunset.

Not once had Maude tried to corrupt the guard; she knew him and Golddust could not have placed there a more incorruptible man.

But the prisoner of the shanty was at the door for a purpose, and she listened to the miner as he walked away as if to keep his limbs in good trim.

When the twilight came on he looked into the cabin and almost came in contact with Montana Maude's face.

"Davis," said Maude, "Davis, don't go away. I want to talk with you."

"With me? It's agin orders."

"But I will talk and you shall listen, Davis."

Davis, eager to hear what the woman would say, looked up and down the street and, slipping inside, pulled the door to and leaned against it.

"What is it, woman?"

Maude seemed to come a little nearer and her eyes looked the man through.

"What are your orders, Davis?"

"To keep you in here," answered the man, with a grin.

"That's not hard to do, eh? I haven't given you much trouble, have I?"

"You haven't."

"Who gave you your orders?"

"Sheriff."

"And if I had attempted to escape? What?"

"I was to see that you never got far."

"Listen to me, Davis. They are going to carry out their crime to-night."

"What crime?"

"Captain Flash is going to make Effie his wife."

"What's that to me? If the girl's willing, and I hear she is, why, let them mate."

"But, Davis, she isn't."

"When did she change her mind? A week ago you was ready to give her away to Captain Flash."

Maude smiled a little.

"One changes one's opinion in a short time, Davis."

The guard nodded.

"And you've changed yours?"

"Yes."

"And helped the girl off? Got her to leave that dummy in the shanty while you two took to the hills?"

"Perhaps. This crime must not take place."

"You can't help it, Maude."

"If you let it proceed the vengeance of justice will surely include you in her list."

"You don't mean that if it goes off and

you get loose you will make it hot for me?"

"I didn't say that, Davis. I only warned you."

"Well, it looked that way to me. But what's the difference if Effie marries the captain?"

"All the difference in the world."

"It concerns you, then?"

"Terribly," spoke Montana Maude. "You remember old Raper, Davis?"

"And the chart he was said to carry on his person? Was that a true story?"

"It was true. The chart was stolen by the hand that killed the old man."

"Why, didn't they search Taos and Tophet, then?"

"They wouldn't have found it if they had."

"They might have tried."

"The chart was not on the person of either of the Twins. Another person has it."

"Now?"

"At this time, Davis."

"Do you know who that person is?"

"I know."

"Is the old chart worth much?"

"Millions."

"Does it really locate the mines old Raper used to talk a little about?"

"It locates them beyond doubt."

"I must go outside," said Davis. "It won't do for me to be caught here."

The miner-guard laid his hand on the latch, but the next moment Maude's fingers closed around his wrist.

"You're just the man I'd like to share the secret with," said she. "What's the use of letting a bonanza like this slip through your hands?"

"I would like to be rich. Who wouldn't? But, hang it all, woman, I can't afford to desert the captain."

"The days of Captain Flash are drawing to a close. This man is a crippled lion now."

"I don't know about that. He's a powerful lion, all the same."

"But the trap is set for him. He is passing."

"I can't desert him, I say."

"Why, man, if he could he would crush all of you underneath his heel. He only keeps you here in slavery because he can use you."

"You don't like the captain."

"I don't like him," and Montana Maude spoke deliberately. "Do you think I would have winged him if I did?"

"Of course not. You shot to kill, didn't you?"

"Yes, but a bush deflected the bullet."

"Better for you, I'm thinking, if it had reached the heart for which it was intended."

"We shall see. Davis, would you let me see Effie?"

The miner-guard started at the proposition.

"I dare not," he said.

"Just for a moment—no more. I'll come back."

Davis looked at Montana Maude incredulously.

"Effie is in her house. She wants to see me. There are shadows between here and there. I'll keep in them and you shall go with me, Davis."

"No," said Davis, resolutely.

"Then, stay here, as if I still inhabited the shanty. That will be better. If you do this there shall be no betrayal on my part, and a part of the great bonanza shall be yours."

It was a tempting bait for the miner-guard, and Montana Maude held her breath while she waited for his decision.

The man wavered.

Once he looked out and saw how thick the shadows were, then he turned again to the captive of the shanty and she took hope.

"It must be kept secret," said he.

"Forever!"

"Swear that it shall!"

"I do," and Maude solemnly raised her hand.

Davis leaned forward and unloosed the cords which, till then, had united the

woman's wrists loosely, and stepped to the door.

"Remember! not long!" said he.

Maude took a long breath and slipped to the portal.

In another moment she was on the outside among the shadows and the next behind the shanty.

Davis went to his beat as if nothing had happened, and Maude shortened the distance between her and Effie's home.

She could not have been gone ten minutes when the miner-guard heard her steps and saw her looking into his face with a smile of triumph.

"A thousand thanks," said Maude. "Here, slip on the cords again. I'll never forget you, Davis."

Once more back in the cabin, Montana Maude leaned against the wall and showed by her mien that she had achieved a victory.

What had she accomplished? Time would tell.

After awhile she heard a noise at the door and Davis' form was seen there.

"Maude, your eyes seem to be sharper than mine," said he. "Come to the door and use them."

Instantly Montana Maude obeyed, and Davis pointed along the fronts of the shanties, directing her gaze at a certain object outlined like a crouching dog before one of them.

Maude looked a few moments without speaking, and then she glanced up into the guard's face.

"It's a man," said she.

"I think it is."

"When did he come there?"

"I can't say. I turned around awhile ago and caught sight of him. Before that he could not have been there."

Davis moved a step forward, all the time watching the suspicious figure closely, and watched in turn by Montana Maude.

"I've got my orders," said the guard at last, in low tones, to the woman.

"To shoot a figure like that?"

"Exactly."

"But you don't know why he is yonder. After all, he may not be a spy."

"I'll try him."

Davis pulled his six-shooter and cocked it.

The little click startled Montana Maude into life, and she laid her hands on his arm.

"You must not. Another share of the bonanza if you don't shoot."

"You can't corrupt me, Maude. The spy over there will be dead in a flash."

Davis pulled loose from Maude's grip and threw himself forward as he raised the revolver.

"Stand up!" he called to the suspicious object.

There was a movement in front of the shanty and something looking human like stood erect.

"Hands up!" commanded Davis.

"Hands down," said Maude at the miner-guard's ear. "If you shoot I'll tell how you befriended me."

"You—"

"Hands down, Davis. You know what Captain Flash does to traitors. You are one. There! the man is gone."

It was true, for when Davis looked again, the spot where he had seen the dark figure was vacant.

Maude laughed.

"You infernal mountain Delilah!" cried Davis, turning on her like a maddened lion, "I've a mind to throttle you right here and leave you to the coyotes."

"Not yet!"

It was a masculine voice, and at the same time a man sprang from behind the shanty and jumped upon Davis like a leaping panther.

The guard was thrown back against the rough wall of the cabin and pinioned there in the twinkling of an eye.

He tried to use his revolver, but his hand was rendered useless, and the knife he reached for was never touched.

The assailant seemed younger and more active than Davis, and with the strength of a young Hercules he choked

the guard into unconsciousness and tossed him inside the shanty.

"Now!" said he, turning to Montana Maude, "do you want to go with us?"

"With you? Do you mean—"

"Yes, with Effie and I. I've just seen her and she will try it again."

"But, look yonder!" exclaimed Montana Maude. "You are too late, Mr. Holloway. Captain Flash has sent after his bride."

The young man looked at the figures plainly seen in the middle of the street and for a moment gave up the contest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"MADAM GOLDDUST."

The words "Captain Flash has sent after his bride," stunned Holloway.

The forms of men in the street and in plain view, despite the shadows of night told him that Maude had spoken the truth.

He looked a moment and then threw a glance at the figure of Davis, which had sunk to the foot of the wall.

He put one hand upon his hip, but the fingers of Montana Maude fell upon his arm.

"They're ten, you're but one," she said. "You can't fight all Sunset."

"But Captain Flash shall not carry out his diabolical scheme!"

"He shall not. Trust me for that."

"You?"

Maude did not reply, and the men in the street turned toward Effie's cabin.

They did not appear to see Holloway and Maude at the door of the woman's shanty, but filed down the street, watched by the young man.

"I can beat them to the place!" said he.

"And lose your life? Effie is ready."

"I see! After all, you still stand in with Captain Flash. After wounding him in the mountain you are still his slave."

"The future will answer that. It will give your words the lie," bitterly cried Montana Maude.

Holloway watched the band a second longer and then drew back.

"You want her to become Captain Flash's bride to-night?" he said.

"I do not."

"But what means that party?"

"Captain Flash has sent for her."

"And all your authority cannot separate them now."

"Go back. Quit Sunset, for after you work here your life isn't worth the wick of a snuffed candle."

"But Captain Flash shall first know that he cannot rob Hugh Holloway with heartless impunity."

The young man withdrew and Maude bent over Davis, the miner-guard.

The man revived under her care, and in a short time rose to his feet, still half dazed.

"Who did it?" he asked.

"You saw him, Davis."

"But faintly. He has the strength of a lion, and his fingers left their marks in my throat."

"Never mind. They have just passed to Effie's cabin. Captain Flash has sent for his bride."

"Good for the captain! I told you that you could not successfully interfere."

"No? Davis, I am going away from here."

"You?"

"Yes, and now."

"You shall not! It will make a sure traitor out of me."

"Why, man, already to-night you betrayed your master when you let me visit Effie."

"I did, but—"

"You shall betray him again."

"Never, Maude!"

The woman held up her hands, which the knife of Holloway had liberated, and shook him off.

"Don't follow me," she said, madly. "You don't know all about me, Davis."

"You intend to ruin me, woman."

"Why not? You're willing, eh?"

"By heavens! you shall not go," and Davis threw out his hand, to see the

woman slip beyond it and stand there with a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

"They'll hold me accountable," cried the miner-guard.

"Of course they will. Captain Flash won't listen to excuses. You might as well quit Sunset."

With this the woman walked away, leaving Davis in front of the cabin.

She did not look back, but made her way to the pines in front of Captain Flash's mansion and boldly opened the door.

She was greeted by an exclamation of surprise when she entered a room where two men occupied seats at a table.

One of these was Captain Flash himself, and the other the man called "the parson" throughout Sunset.

The coming of Montana Maude was like the rising of the dead, and the nabob of the silver hills looked at her like a man doubly surprised.

"I am not too late, I trust," said Maude, as she coolly took up her station between the table and the door from which she regarded the two men.

"Too late for what?"

"The ceremony. It's near the hour, isn't it?"

Captain Flash and his friend exchanged looks and then turned their eyes again upon the woman.

"I did not send for you," said the nabob.

"But I'm the uninvited guest."

"We don't want you here. Stay! You are very welcome, all the same."

Maude seemed to read the inmost thoughts of the speaker, for she smiled and waved her hand toward the door.

"They will be here before long. I saw them on the street," she said.

"Your little game was a failure," said Captain Flash.

"Which one?"

"The one lately played out. You did not get to carry the girl far. Golddust overtook you."

"Golddust stole a march on us. I'll admit that. He and his men are cooler and keener than their master. You did not overtake us, captain."

"No."

"It was the little bush that saved your life. I aimed for your heart."

"And fortune favored him," exclaimed the parson. "Captain Flash of Sunset was not born to be shot down by a woman."

Maude turned her flashing eyes instantly upon the speaker and transfixed him with her glance.

"You were," said she. "You know that you dare not pass beyond Sunset southward. You know that a revengeful woman waits for you in the chapparel down there—a woman whose hand will some day rid the earth of your miserable carcass."

The parson winced, and Captain Flash smiled at his discomfiture.

"They're coming now," continued Montana Maude, as she heard sounds beyond the door.

The Czar of Sunset watched the portal anxiously and seemed to hold his breath.

He heard voices out there and felt that when the door opened he would greet Effie, the Wind-flower.

When the door opened there stepped forward the tall figure of Golddust George, and at his back were half a dozen other familiar forms.

But Effie was not with them.

Golddust George caught sight of Montana Maude and turned upon her instantly.

"She's played out her hand," he cried. "There's the woman who has beaten you, captain."

"What has happened? Where is the girl?"

"Ask Montana Maude."

"You did not find her in the cabin?"

"We did not. It was an empty nest."

Fury leaped up in the orbs of Captain Flash, and in another instant he was on his feet.

"Guard the door yonder," he roared. "Stand between Montana Maud and it."

She shall confess the truth or forever see her power wane in death."

The queen in the game did not quail. She looked into the white face of Captain Flash and seemed to smile.

Golddust George threw his burly figure between Maude and the portal and looked across the table at his master.

"Where is she?" cried Captain Flash. "You sent your man out to see. Ask him."

"You heard his report. The cabin is empty. You have spirited her away."

"What, when I was a captive myself?"

"But you came here foot-lose. You have corrupted or killed the guard. You have played out a cool hand just like some others of your making. This is Sunset, woman. This is the place from which no guilty person escapes."

"How about Centipede?" quietly asked Montana Maude.

"To hades with Centipede! We are dealing with you now. Where is Effie of Sunset?"

"Out yonder," smiled the cornered queen.

"Seize her, Golddust. You remember what I promised you. The time for the ceremony has come."

Golddust George hesitated as he caught the light that leaped up in the woman's eyes, but Captain Flash's voice rang out again.

"It shall be done now. You shall have a wife at once. Stand beside her, Captain Golddust."

Maude did not resist, but the look Golddust George received from her as he stepped forward was not very encouraging.

"Make them man and wife, Parson!" Maude held out her hand.

Her face was strangely white, and her figure was drawn to its queenly height in the light.

It was a brief ceremony, and the Parson went through it as rapidly as possible.

Golddust George stepped back and looked at his master.

"Now tell the truth," cried Captain Flash. "Now, Madam Golddust, what have you done with Effie?"

"That is my secret."

"Yours? You won't confess?"

"I will not."

"To 'the cage' with her!" was the next order. "To the cage with her, Golddust."

"With your own wife?" exclaimed Maude, as she faced her husband. "You have just sworn to honor and obey me. I have promised to be faithful to you. You have heard the man who has lorded it over you for years. He commands you to take me—your wife—to the cages under ground. Take your choice, Golddust. Obey me or Captain Flash."

It was a dilemma for Golddust George sure enough.

He looked first at the woman he had just wedded and then at Captain Flash.

Neither spoke.

Some one at that moment came to the steps outside and all heard him there.

Captain Flash stamped the floor in his rage.

"You will obey me, Captain Golddust," he exclaimed. "That woman is your wife; but duty first."

Montana Maude sprang to the door.

"She is going to give us the slip," shouted the nabob of Sunset.

"Not yet," calmly answered the woman. "I am now the wife of the high-sheriff of the silver camp. Touch me if you dare, Captain Flash. The husband to whom you have given me will defend me even against you. He dare do no less!"

She pulled the door open so suddenly that some one out there fell back with a startled cry.

"It's the yellow devil! It's Centipede," cried several of Golddust George's followers.

The little object in the light that shivered through the doorway seemed to spring into the room.

Half a dozen hands grabbed for him,

but he eluded all, and in another instant he threw up a six-shooter and covered the nabob of Montana.

Centipede had come back for blood; the sting of the little reptile had not lost its power.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE LARIAT'S CLUTCHES.

Blood for blood.

This was the unwritten law of the mountains—the code of Sunset, and the citizens of the silver camp had it brought back to them in a startling manner, for they saw a lot of dark-visaged men drag a little body across the plaza.

It was a few minutes after the events of the last chapter, and one of the leaders of the mob, tall and firm-faced, was Golddust, the new husband of Montana Maude.

On the south side of the plaza stood the only tree there, a fine old one, with wide-spreading branches, upon which more than one victim of camp law had swung in days before the opening of our drama.

It was toward this tree that the men of Sunset dragged Centipede.

The little man in yellow, with his lips compressed and his eyes on the alert, struggled not.

Why should he? Was he not in the clutches of as mad a lot of human beings as ever pulled a victim to the halter? and why should he, sent to death by the command of his old master, try to escape from certain doom?

The tree, in full view of the Winged Lazarus, was waiting for its terrible fruit; it stood in the moonlight, lifting its branches toward the sky, silent like all gallows trees.

Golddust George directed matters. He hurried the crowd forward and looked to see if life still remained in Centipede's body.

Perhaps he regretted that his hand had struck down the weapon which the yellow man had thrust into Captain Flash's face, for had not the nabob of Sunset united him against his will to Montana Maude? but be that as it may he was in duty bound to carry out the mandates of this same man with at least two names.

The men on the porch of the Winged Lazarus noticed the unusual commotion the moment it struck the plaza.

Perhaps they divined what it meant without questions, for one and all sprang up and started for the spot.

They saw Centipede in the grip of the minions of Captain Flash; they noticed the closed lips, the furious mien, the cool look.

If he had run from fifty revolvers a short time before, he was not a coward now.

"Stand back!" cried Golddust George as the crowd pressed him a little sharp.

At the same time he waved it back and the men retreated sullenly.

"It's Centipede," said some one.

"It's no one else," growled the high-sheriff of Sunset. "He attempted the captain's life."

"With the gun?"

"Sartainly. He came back like a sneaking coyote. He tried to shoot the captain—"

"That settles it. Up with the coward!"

Some one threw a lariat over Centipede's head, and it settled over his shoulders.

At the same moment he was jerked forward, for two men were at the other end of the hairy cord and Golddust George saw the rope cast dexterously over the limb.

"That's far enough, gentlemen!" said a voice.

It was a voice at sound of which forty men turned and gazed at the speaker.

Ten feet from the marked victim of the mob stood Sandy Sam, with both arms akimbo, but in dangerous proximity to his hips.

All gazed at him astonished, as if he had willfully sealed his own doom; but no one spoke.

Golddust George stayed his hand and the men at the lariat cursed the interloper.

"This man has had no trial," continued the Shadow Sport.

"None is needed. He was caught in the act."

"It was only an attempt. No blood was shed."

"But it's just as much murder in the eyes of the law in Sunset as if blood flowed and some one dropped dead."

Sandy Sam walked still nearer to Centipede and turned to the crowd.

"You have a court here. You try men even in Sunset, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"You shall try this man."

"But it's the mandate—"

"The order of your Czar, you mean," interrupted the Shadow Sport. "Captain Flash has no right to sentence without the finding of the court. As Kidded Eric he did that once. Go and ask him."

Golddust George and his men exchanged looks.

"You shall not hang Centipede without trial. Make your charges and produce your witnesses."

Sandy Sam laid his hand on the rope about Centipede's neck and by a swift movement threw it over his head.

The black cord fell to the ground.

The next moment the man from the coast gave the little fellow a spin that sent him ten feet from the tree and nearly upset him.

The crowd surged forward, but two revolvers suddenly whipped from their hiding places confronted them, backed by the steady hand and keen eye of Sandy Sam.

"Gentlemen, let us have fair play. Your master will ask a trial for himself, so he says. He shall have it fairly before the court of Sunset. Why not Centipede? What rights has Captain Flash above those of his slave?"

Golddust George drew back.

The Frisco Shadow leaned toward Centipede, watching him like a hawk, and said:

"Go to the Lazarus. I'll meet you there," and immediately Centipede sneaked away.

"Centipede shall be here whenever his case is called for trial," he went on, addressing again the mob of Sunset. "When you want him tried he will be here, I say."

Once more Golddust George and his men looked at one another.

"And you?" cried the leader of the band.

"You will find me here, too."

"You don't like the captain? You've accused him of crime."

"I have. I accuse him of murder. Kidded Eric said he would demand a trial. As yet he has not done so. Tell him for me, gentlemen, that the proof is ready."

With this Sandy Sam was permitted to go.

As he turned to the hotel some one touched Golddust George on the arm and pointed after the cool detective sport.

"I can drop him, sheriff. It won't be half a shot for Durango Tom."

"No, Tom. Not yet. He is playing his boldest cards against certain fate. Sandy Sam is only tempting death by his actions in the captain's empire."

The Shadow Sport vanished beyond the porch of the Winged Lazarus, and was directed to a little room in the rear by the bronzed landlord.

Opening the door, he came face to face with the man he had just saved from the lariat.

Centipede greeted Sandy Sam with a grin and waited for him to speak.

"How's your neck, my little man?" began the Shadow Sport.

"Feel bad," and Centipede touched the skin with his yellow hand as his face grew dark.

"You went back to shoot the captain?"

A nod.

"Fool! Don't you know that he is still in the house of his friends?"

"But he turned me over to the hangmen of Sunset!"

"Yes. When I told you that he once deserted you in the canyon you would not believe."

"I believe it now."

"You've had it pounded into you, as it were," smiled Sandy Sam. "You wouldn't give Captain Flash a recommendation of faithfulness just now?"

"Never!"

"I thought not. It was a close call for you to-night, Centipede. When you are lawfully tried—"

"They shan't try me at all," blurted the yellow man. "Silver Saul's court is no good."

"But it is the legal court of Sunset."

"With the judge corrupted and the jury fixed. I see!" laughed Centipede. "Don't let them try me in that court. Give me a chance and I'll cheat all the courts in the silver hills."

"Centipede, I want you for a witness."

"In whose court?"

"In Silver Saul's as you call it."

"No! I can't appear there."

"But you must. You must tell the court the past history of Kiddled Eric."

The little man leaped forward and clutched Sandy Sam's sleeve.

"That means death!" he cried. "Why, I wouldn't get a foot from the plaza."

"But Kiddled Eric wants your blood."

"Yes."

"He has married Montana Maude to Golddust George and you will have to look elsewhere for a wife."

The little man grinned.

"Long life to Golddust as her lord," he exclaimed, almost dancing a jig of delight in the middle of the room. "I am willing to do anything for you, Sandy Sam, but I cannot testify in Silver Saul's court."

"Then, go out yonder and let them hunt you down," and the Shadow Sport pushed the other from him. "You are still in the shadow of death. You tolled Rube and I into the pit beneath the nabob's house; you threw Hugh Holloway into the circular dungeon from which we rescued him. All this you did in the service of Captain Flash. Now he would repay you with the lariat's noose. You won't go back to the old days in the Land of the Mad Lariats? You won't tell Sunset the story of the man who was found dead one morning on the porch of the ranch while you and the captain journeyed toward the rising sun."

"Heavens! do you know?"

"I know," said Sam, severely. "You know who killed the stranger and why he was killed."

Centipede looked away and breathed hard.

"You say to me that you won't tell all this in Silver Saul's court?" demanded the Shadow Sport.

"I dare not."

"Why not, pray?"

"The court's been tampered with."

"Why says so?"

"I do."

"Where's your proof?"

"I witnessed the work. I heard it all."

"Oho, you know whereof you speak, then? You know that Silver Saul is no longer the embodiment of Montana justice."

"That's it, Sandy Sam. My ears are sharp. I have not been far since I ran across the plaza. I know all the hiding places in Sunset. Let them catch Centipede napping if they can!"

"But this story about the corrupting of the court?" said Sandy Sam. "Who was the agent?"

"Golddust."

"And Saul agreed?"

"Yes. Captain Flash is to demand a trial before a court that is 'fixed.' He knows that now. And after his acquittal you may imagine what will follow."

The Shadow Sport did not speak, but looked down into the eyes of the speaker, as if in deep thought.

"Silver Saul is under obligations to Golddust. Once Golddust saved his life and he can now pay the debt. At heart the court of Sunset wants to get rid of Captain Flash. Until to-night it was the only thing in camp he could not control. But it is in his hands now. He holds the court in his power."

"The infamous villain!" exclaimed Sandy Sam. "Kiddled Eric is making the fight of his life. But wait! We will see if Silver Saul carries justice in his grip even in Sunset," and with this the Shadow Sport walked across the room and gazed out of the little window there, watched breathless and hawk-like by Centipede.

"It's no use," muttered the latter. "You can't win in this fight, Sandy Sam. Your doom is sealed."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CLOSED ROOM AT SILVER SAUL'S.

The man waiting for the result of the hanging heard Golddust George walk up the pine-bordered walk and watched him eagerly as he entered the house.

Captain Flash was the first to speak. "You finished with him in a short time?" he said.

"We didn't hang the yellow man."

"What! you failed to carry out the mandate?"

"We have him in our hands at any time, but just now he is under Sandy Sam's protection."

The nabob's color changed.

"You didn't give in to this man?" he cried.

"He cowed the boys."

"With you at their head, Golddust?"

"I didn't want blood shed while he enjoyed a temporary advantage."

"This is outrageous!"

The high-sheriff of Sunset looked away for a moment, but his gaze came back to the man he served.

"You forget that I've seen Saul," he said.

"That is true, but this gives them a breathing spell. It lets Sandy Sam think he has won the game."

"But he will soon be undeceived."

"I hope so."

"The court is ours, captain."

"Then the sooner I demand my trial the better?"

"Yes."

"It shall be done in the morning."

"Why not to-night? We have held sessions after dark, you know."

"But the wedding first. We will have that now and the trial by daylight."

"But you know we did not find the girl at home."

"True, but that wife of yours, Golddust."

"She won't betray Effie."

Captain Flash struck the table with his fist.

"She shall! She's helped the girl away again."

Golddust George looked for a half a second at his master, and a strange expression came to his tanned face.

He took a step nearer the table and leaned across it as he eyed the man on the opposite side.

"You married me to Montana Maude against my will," he said.

"Yes, but she'll make you a good wife if you can tame her."

"Perhaps. You talk just now of forcing the secret of Effie's whereabouts from her."

"It must be done."

"Remember! Montana Maude is now the wife of Golddust George."

"You don't mean that you will shield the woman in her silence?" exclaimed Captain Flash.

"She is my wife. You understand what that means."

The nabob's lower jaw fell.

"I must find Effie," said he. "The ceremony must take place between this hour and daylight."

"I'm with you. I'll scour the mountain again and find the trail if possible. But remember that Montana Maude is my wife, and you must not show your

authority against her without my consent."

"Then go out and find the trail," was the reply. "The trial shall be demanded for six in the morning."

Slowly Golddust George turned away and his burly figure went down the walk.

"Is the man going to desert me?" cried Captain Flash, as he eyed the high-sheriff. "Has Golddust George formed a passion for his wife? If I had imagined that—"

The door behind him opened so suddenly that the sentence was broken and there stood in the middle of the room a man in dark-topped boots.

"Well?" asked Captain Flash, as he turned upon the new-comer.

"I've found the girl—Effie."

"You? You, Durango Tom?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"In Sunset."

"And you can put your hand on her at any time."

"At any moment."

Captain Flash for a moment looked delightedly at Durango Tom, and then extended his hand.

"You're worth your weight in gold!" he cried. "In Sunset. Then Maude did not decoy her out of camp this time."

"I can't say about what Maude did not do. I know where Effie is and her hiding place might surprise you."

"Where is she?"

"She is the guest of Silver Saul."

"The Lord Chief Justice of Sunset?" laughed Captain Flash. "So she is there? Who took her thither?"

Durango Tom shook his head.

"The ceremony shall proceed at once. I'll send for the parson and we'll see that there is no more interruption."

"I would advise you to go a little slow, captain."

"Why so?"

"You don't know the temper of Silver Saul."

"I know it," laughed the nabob. "The court is all right, Tom. It's been seen."

"Make sure of it."

"I've done that already."

Ten minutes later the dark figure of Durango Tom might have been seen among the shadows in the vicinity of Silver Saul's house.

All at once another figure came out of the darkness and joined it.

"Is she there yet?" asked the second figure.

"Yes."

"They'll be here in a minute! Listen! they're coming now, the captain and Parson Blake."

The two men drew back and waited.

Three men approached Silver Saul's house and one laid his hand on the latch.

"The girl will be the captain's wife in less than three minutes," said Durango Tom.

The door was opened by some one on the inside, and the trio filed in.

Captain Flash, dressed in his nobbiest suit, faced a tall man in common clothes in the room beyond the door.

"I thought best to have the little ceremony performed here," he said, addressing Silver Saul.

"The what?" was the answer. "You don't think that the Wind-flower is here?"

"She is, Captain Saul."

"The house is before you," and Silver Saul waved his hand toward the door behind him.

Captain Flash looked nonplused.

"She has been here?" he said.

"I don't know. There is a part of this house that I never enter. All Sunset knows that."

"It is yon room, I suppose?"

"That is the door I haven't opened in five years, or ever since my wife died."

Captain Flash and his friends looked at the closed portal and then at each other.

"Effie, my promised wife, has been tracked to your house, Captain Saul. There's no doubt of that. The information is reliable."

The Chief Justice of Sunset glanced at the closed door again and smiled.

"If so it is a secret which has never been entrusted to me," he said. "Effie in my house?"

"She came here."

"Then she must be yonder—in the forbidden room."

All eyes were turned toward the closed apartment and Captain Flash seemed eager to investigate.

At the same time he did not want to irritate Silver Saul, whom Golddust George had just "fixed" in his (Captain Flash's) interests, therefore he found himself in a dilemma.

"Look beyond the door," said Silver Saul, "I grant this privilege. It will be the first time it has been open to my knowledge since they carried her out."

Captain Flash made a sign to one of his companions, and that person stepped forward.

"It is not locked," said Saul. "I never lock that door."

The nabob's man laid his hand on the latch, but seemed to hesitate.

"I'll open it," cried the master spirit of the silver camp, and in another instant Captain Flash was at the portal.

He opened it and leaned into the dark room.

"A match!" he cried.

One of the men struck a light and ran forward.

"She's here, boys."

At the same time Captain Flash recoiled, for the light of the lucifer revealed a tableau, beautiful, yet startling, in the middle of the forbidden room.

Effie stood there—Effie the Wind-flower of Sunset, Montana Maude's ward and the bride whom he hunted.

She looked like a statue as she faced the nabob of the camp, her features ashen in hue and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

For half a second Captain Flash stared at the girl as he would have stared at an apparition.

A faint smile came to Effie's lips, and those in the other room were silent.

"Call her out, captain, if you have found the girl," said Silver Saul.

Effie seemed to plant herself more firmly on the floor, and a quiet look of determination illumined her countenance.

"She will not come out," said Captain Flash. "The girl defies me. She will not stir. We can have the ceremony performed where she is."

"Not in that room," answered Silver Saul. "It is my wife's death-chamber. It shall not be the scene of a marriage."

"But the girl—"

"You are strong, Captain Flash. The beauty of Sunset is not nailed to the floor yonder."

Captain Flash understood, and the next instant he had sprung across the threshold to halt as suddenly as he made the spring.

Effie's hand had moved, and all saw that it clutched a knife, the blade of which shone in the light of the lamp.

"There she is!" said Silver Saul. "If you can take her to the altar she shall be yours, even in this house; but not in that room."

The lips of the young girl were welded with firmness, and she stood like a statue of marble in the middle of the room.

"The bird doesn't want to change her nest evidently, captain," remarked Silver Saul, with a smile.

"But she's already given her consent."

"Women change their minds sometimes."

"But this is Sunset. This is the silver camp of the hills, and I am master here!"

"Very well, then, take your bride, but mind you, don't take her by violence."

Captain Flash once more advanced, but at the door he recoiled again as if the knife had moved toward his bosom.

A sudden thought flashed through his brain.

"Come here, Parson," he exclaimed.

"You are clothed with extraordinary powers. Distance shall not cut a figure in this matter. There stands the bride. I am ready!"

The tall, marrying fraud of Sunset, ever ready to obey Captain Flash in everything, went forward and halted at the door.

"Proceed!" commanded the nabob.

"Halt!"

The last word was spoken in a different voice, and all looked toward the door.

"The devil!" cried Captain Flash.

"No, Hugh Holloway, monster. If you attempt to go on with this ceremony, Captain Flash, you die in your boots. The girl belongs to me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TOSS OF A COIN IN THE DARK.

"You can't win in this fight against Captain Flash. Your doom is sealed, Sandy Sam."

It was with these words that Centipede saw the man from the coast quit his presence, after the interview at the Winged Lazarus, and the yellow man believed every one of them.

The Frisco Sport was by no means master of the situation.

He was a marked man in Sunset, the man against whom the high court had been cleverly set by Golddust George and doomed from the moment of the corrupting.

Sandy Sam walked from the hotel to the Tame Rattlesnake, whose light fell across the walk outside and bathed a part of the dusty street in red.

As he entered the place and glanced around upon the crowd there, as if in search of a particular person, he was noticed by a man who seemed to clutch his cards a little harder while he looked at the Shadow Sport.

As Sandy Sam neared the bar he caught sight of this person and they exchanged looks.

Several minutes later the player dropped his cards, threw up the stakes he had placed on the table, and left his bench.

He walked over to the Shadow Sport and held out his hand.

"You got my message?" said he.

Sandy Sam nodded.

"Good! I sent it to the right place, then."

"It's all right."

"How goes the game?"

"Come with me, Roger."

The two men walked out and the Shadow Sport led his companion back to the Winged Lazarus and to the little room where he had just interviewed Centipede.

"One moment before you begin," said the one called Roger, holding up his hand. "I want to say that I saw the Twins in the mountain."

"Taos and Tophet, eh?"

"Yes."

"Where were they?"

"I caught sight of them on the elevated trail. They had their faces turned in this direction."

"Do you think they intend to invade Sunset?"

"Undoubtedly they do. I heard Taos say that they would make somebody take water here."

Sandy Sam was silent for a moment and then he began to tell his companion the story of his adventures since coming to the mountain camp.

"I've found Kidded Eric," said he, in conclusion. "Captain Flash is the nabob of the old ranch—the King of the Land of the Mad Lariats. He has confessed as much to me."

"But you are against the whole camp. They are organized against you, Sam."

"It seems so, but I've faced odds before. I haven't hunted this man so long as to let him win the game."

"No. Well, I am here to help you. Shall we go back to the scene of the crime?"

"That depends. If the high court of

Sunset would do him justice, I would turn him over to it. But they've played with the chief justice."

"Who is he?"

"Silver Saul."

"And you say they've corrupted the court?"

"Golddust carried on the negotiations. The plot was overheard. I know all about it."

"Who overheard the plot? A reliable person?"

"Centipede."

Roger seemed to smile.

"I heard the Twins speak of him in the mountains, and they have marked him for a victim."

"Centipede is the witness to the corrupting of the court, and I am ready to believe the little man's story."

Roger walked to the window that looked out upon the street, and stood there silent.

Suddenly he turned and faced Sandy Sam.

"It's a fight for vengeance and life," said he.

"It is."

"You can't depend on Centipede."

"I know it. He is a coward at heart, yet he would kill in the dark."

"Just why you can't trust the wretch."

"That is true."

"I am here to stand by you to the bitter end," said Roger, firmly. "We must not quail. The girl who is old Raper's ward is the child of the man found dead on the porch of Kidded Eric's ranch-house in Lariat Land."

"She is. She is the old man's heir and the marvelous mine belongs to her."

"Exactly! Captain Flash holds the chart and the key. It is this he plays for."

"Of course."

"Out yonder," suddenly exclaimed Sandy Sam. "Out there, I say, is the dead line. When Captain Flash demands a trial on the charge made by myself that he killed Raper Donalds, he will get it from the 'fixed' court."

"When will the demand be made?"

"In a few hours."

"But he evidently wants a wife first."

"Perhaps; but he will find an enemy in the person of young Holloway, a little hot-headed, but generally cool."

"What is the youth to Captain Flash and all his men?"

"Not much, I must confess."

"They will brush him from their path like a straw. He cannot withstand the men of Sunset, headed, as they are, by this monster in mountain broadcloth. He has forgotten me," and Roger laughed.

"When did you see him last?"

"In Frisco. We had it over the table nearly all night, and I had the pleasure of sending Captain Flash to his banker. He hasn't liked me since; but I've grown a beard and he wouldn't know me now."

"Don't think it. He is a man with a marvelous memory, and his eye is as keen as the eagle's."

"I'm willing to face him and give him a trial," responded Roger. "I'm eager to do it."

"You may have an opportunity before you expect," and with this the interview came to a close.

As Sandy Sam stepped from the Winged Lazarus his arm was caught by a bunch of fingers and he looked down into the face of Centipede.

"They've come back to Sunset, Captain Sam," said the yellow man.

"Taos and Tophet?"

"Yes, the strangling Twins of Tartarus. Let's have a peep at them."

"Where are they now?"

Centipede hurried the Shadow Sport away, and pointed at a shanty not far from the end of the street.

"It's Robinet's shanty," said Sam.

"Yes, and they're in there. No one saw 'em enter Sunset but Centipede."

The exterior of the shanty was dark and it stood in the shadows that surrounded it.

Sandy Sam and Centipede approached.

the place cautiously, with their hands on their weapons and near the door both stopped.

A hum of voices came from beyond the portal and both listened with all ears.

The occupants of the shanty were talking in the dark, but by and by the voices became familiar.

"Which one first?" asked one of the unseen men.

"I say, Captain Flash."

"Let's take the little man's topknot first. Let's get rid of the yellow viper."

"Trash! that's what I call him. Captain Flash is bigger game. He's worth bringing down, and the Shadow Sport, Sandy Sam, our old foe—"

"Now you have it. That's the man I want!"

In the silence that followed the last words the two men with their faces close together on the outside of the shanty looked at one another.

"Toss up a coin," said one of the Twins.

"In the dark?"

"Yes. We'll light a match when it drops."

"Agreed! How shall it be?"

"Tails for Sandy Sam first."

"Here goes! It's the nicked dollar, you know, the lucky one."

Presently a light flashed up in the shanty near the ground and Sandy Sam ventured to look onto it.

He saw two men on the floor, and one was holding the match over a coin there.

"It's tails!" cried Taos.

"By heavens! it is. That's bad. I wanted to begin on Captain Flash. Shall we toss over?"

"No. Once settles it. You've got the little noose, brother?"

"Yes."

"We will find our quarry at the hotel. I know the room. He won't get to order us out o' Sunset this time."

"That's the last time he worked that game. We can't afford to make a mis-play now."

"No."

Sandy Sam fell back, pulling Centipede after him, and when he had reached a spot some distance from the cabin he whispered at the yellow man's ears.

"I'm the victim of these outlaws! I'm to be strangled with the magic noose."

"But you won't let 'em, Captain Sam?"

A smile parted the lips of the Shadow Sport and he threw a look of defiance toward the shanty.

"They expect to find me in my room at the Winged Lazarus, and I shall not disappoint them."

"But you surely won't go there?"

"Why not, Centipede? They want me to be at home when they come, and I'll be there."

Centipede ceased to remonstrate, and walked sullenly off with the Shadow Sport, who entered the hotel and passed up the stairs.

When would the stranglers come? At what hour would they attempt to carry out their diabolical move, and would both slip up the stair-case at the same time?

The man from Frisco sat in the dark and waited.

The minutes crept away, and he grew a trifle impatient.

Perhaps they had given up the plan for the night; perhaps the Twins feared the lion they wanted to slay.

All at once the Shadow Sport saw a shadow flit across the street near the hotel.

Then came another and it seemed to join the first near the building.

He turned from his window and went back to his station.

Sunset grew stiller and darker.

The gamblers at the Tame Rattlesnake seemed to have deserted the tables underneath the lights.

All at once the sharp ears of the man on the watch heard a sound, and he leaned forward.

A door had opened below.

There were footsteps on the stairs and he heard them faintly; but he knew what they meant.

Not a sound in the room occupied by the marked man.

He heard at last the click of the latch as it was gently lifted.

Sandy Sam gathered his nerves for the ordeal, and held his breath.

The door opened.

The Shadow Sport raised the revolver clutched in his right hand and thrust it forward.

"Sam, Sam, are you here?" said a voice in the dark. "I'll have all Sunset at my heels in a minute, for I've just killed Captain Flash!"

"My God!" rang from the Shadow Sport's lips, and he flashed a match to reveal the white face of Hugh Holloway in the middle of his room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STICK OF DYNAMITE.

The Shadow Sport uttered a cry that resounded throughout the room.

"What's that you've done?" he demanded.

"I've killed Captain Flash."

"Where?"

"In Silver Saul's house!"

"How there?"

"They came after Effie. She was there in hiding. They wanted to make her Captain Flash's bride, but I came between the monster and his game."

"Then that ends my trail," said the Shadow Sport. "I don't know that I ought to stand by you now, Hugh."

The young man looked away as if he had heard a noise down stairs.

"I'll defend myself," he said, resolutely.

"Wait!" was enjoined. "After all, fate may have spared Captain Flash—for justice."

The man of sand went to the door which stood ajar and looked down the stairs.

"Stand back!" he said hurriedly to Hugh. "They're here at last!"

At the same time he pushed the youth toward the wall and gently closed the door.

"I am going to have visitors," he explained in a whisper. "I want you to help receive them."

Holloway, quite astounded, did not reply.

"Draw your weapon. Let them enter. They'll strike a light probably."

For a few seconds the two men stood in the semi-darkness of the chamber over the bar-room; then they heard the door open.

Some one slipped into the room with the tread of a cat.

Silence followed the entrance, but in a moment the two friends caught a very slight sound.

Some one seemed to be moving toward the cot in one corner. Sherlock touched his companion's arm.

The crack of a lucifer was heard, and as it flashed up the two men on guard threw out their pistol hands.

"Jupiter!" was exclaimed as the two men were revealed.

"You see the game is awake, gentlemen," observed Sam, facing Taos and Tophet. "You do me the honor of a night call. You're entirely welcome."

The astonished brace of rogues looked at each other, their faces betraying their uneasiness.

Even so they thought they had been betrayed.

"It's all right," continued Sandy. "What is it, boys? You want to see me, eh?"

"We do," blurted Taos.

"Well, I'm here. And this young man? You've met him before. You saw him in Dead Woman's Gulch."

"The night we stopped the stage," grinned Tophet. "It's all right; but we didn't expect ter find him here."

"Proceed to business," impatiently commanded the Man of Sand. "You say you want to see me."

The rascals knew they had been balked. The game of death which they had planned could not be worked just then against the chosen victim. Sandy Sam stood armed before them, and the quickest finger in the west was at the trigger.

"We've come back ter Sunset on a little business," said Taos, "an' we want ter know if you're going ter play the same hand you played before."

"Not if you play fair," was the reply.

"We're fair play all the time."

"Except when you play the other way," suggested the Shadow Sport, smiling.

"Come! We didn't mean no harm in comin' here. We only want ter hear from your lips, Sam, that we're not ter be molested."

"Of course not."

"That's good. Much obliged. Come, brother!"

Taos nodded at Tophet, and the two toughs started for the door.

"Stop!" suddenly cried Hugh. "Do you like Captain Flash?"

The Twins halted and turned toward the young man.

"We don't like Captain Flash!" said both at once.

"I thought so. Then, you won't join the mob against me?"

"What mob? What have you done?"

Hugh took a long breath.

"I was forced to slay this monster."

"Not Captain Flash?"

"The same."

"When, boy?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Fudge," cried Taos, with a guffaw. "You missed him entirely if you mean that you shot at him. Captain Flash is alive and well."

Hugh and Sandy exchanged glances, and the former said:

"But the mob will rise, anyhow. I am marked for doom."

"Of course. You might as well have sent the bullet into Kidded Eric's brain."

"I wish I had!"

Sam Sherlock saw the Twins quit the room and heard their footsteps on the stairs as they went down.

"Where did you leave Effie?" asked **andy**, turning upon Hugh.

"At Silver Saul's shanty."

"She may be Captain Flash's wife by this time."

"I fear it. But, I will know the truth."

Hugh Holloway went down upon the street and turned toward the house where he had appeared so startlingly to Captain Flash and his cohort.

Some one caught his sleeve.

"Dolt! Why don't you fly?" cried a voice.

"Montana Maude!" exclaimed the youth. "Where is Effie?"

"Yonder!"

The wife of Golddust George pointed toward a shanty.

"Did the monster succeed?"

"No."

"Thank heaven!"

"Well may you say so, but the crisis is here. The paws of the lion are reaching out for you."

Hugh stood irresolute, the revolver still clutched in his hand, his face turned toward Silver Saul's house.

"Alone you can't breast the tide of vengeance," continued Maude. "Captain Flash is still all-powerful here. Listen!"

Loud voices came from behind the door of the Tame Rattlesnake.

"It's the gathering of the evil spirits of Sunset," said the woman. "The real battle is at hand. Captain Flash long ago swore every man here into his service, with the understanding that he would not call them into service unless his authority was imperilled. He has just ordered them out against you and Sandy Sam."

"And they are responding to his call?"

"The Tame Rattlesnake is full of them," asserted Maude. "Could you look beyond those doors you would behold a sight terrible enough to blanch your cheeks."

"I'll look. One might as well face the foe first as last!"

"My God, man, you're mad!" and Maude pulled the youth back. "Don't rush into the lion's den. You'll reach it soon enough."

Holloway looked into her face, white and tensely drawn, and seemed to read her inmost thoughts.

"You're Golddust's wife now?" the young man queried.

"You are right. I am Madam Golddust. Quite a taking title, don't you think?"

"It wasn't of your own seeking, though."

"Perhaps not, but I'll be a true wife to him. Look yonder!"

The door of the Tame Rattlesnake had opened, and in the flood of light there stood a stalwart figure.

"That's my lord and master," smiled Maude. "Behold Golddust George, the right bower of the boss of Sunset."

Holloway saw the tall figure step from the saloon.

Once more the door opened and half a dozen men poured out.

"They'll see you," cried Montana Maude, pushing Holloway back. "If they do—"

The sentence was not finished, for, the next minute, a diminutive figure sprang into sight between them and the open door and a cry was raised.

"The little fool!" said Montana Maude. "It's Centipede."

Sure enough, the yellow man had shown himself to the camp toughs, and they were looking at him with evil intent.

But as sudden as the yellow man had appeared he as suddenly sprang into the shadows.

A howl of rage was sent up and the crowd leaped forward.

"Come!" urged Maude. "Now's your time!"

The mob rushed after Centipede.

"The little viper is too smart for them. He will get away and then they'll want you and Sam Sherlock."

Almost dragged from the spot by the woman, in her frenzy, Holloway was forced back and the last he saw of the armed mob was its rush behind a shanty where Centipede had disappeared.

Half a minute later Holloway stood in the deep shadow of a shanty some distance from the Tame Rattlesnake.

He was alone.

"Shall we make the big play?" was asked so near that the young man started.

"Wait ten minutes. They didn't catch Centipede. They are all back in the ranch. The nest swarms with the devil spirits of Montana."

"Why wait another minute?" demanded another voice, impatiently.

"The lion will be there himself. Golddust has gone for him. Captain Flash will come, for the high-sheriff never fails to fetch his man."

Holloway could not see the speakers, but he could guess their identity, and he waited a little longer in the shadow of the shanty.

"There they come."

At the same time the youth, glancing toward the Tame Rattlesnake, saw the door open, as it admitted Captain Flash and Golddust George.

"The nest is full now," was asserted. "Now for the big coup!"

"Yes; Sunset will have a new history by morning," was the chuckled reply.

Then came a movement of feet, and Hugh saw two men move toward the saloon.

He glided after, his hand on his revolver; but for a few moments he lost sight of them.

Suddenly, however, he caught the flash of a match, and in the light he saw two stooping figures at one side of the famous resort.

The Twins of Tartarus had planned a terrible coup, sure enough, and Holloway saw the hand of Taos thrust under the foundation of the Tame Rattlesnake

a stick of dynamite large enough to blow the place to atoms.

He stopped, thunderstruck; but the next moment the sharp report of a pistol smote the air, and one of the Twins reeled against the saloon, the match still in his hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SANDY SAM'S COOL HEAD.

For a moment Holloway stood dazed, as it seemed, by the shot.

He held his breath while the lighted match revealed the stick of dynamite, and now that the villain had fallen in time to save the tenants of the Tame Rattlesnake, it seemed to him that his limbs were growing weak.

No one seemed to take notice of the shot, at least no one rushed from the saloon, and the other man against the building stood his ground.

Out in the road the darkest thing there was a human figure, and from that spot the shot had come.

Holloway fancied he knew the person there; he thought he recognized Montana Maude; nor was he mistaken.

Suddenly one of the two figures near the Tame Rattlesnake began to pull the fallen body away.

"Quick!" came from the person in the street. "I have you, too, at the mercy of my gun. I know you both!"

Holloway watched the two men there until both vanished behind the next shanty.

"It was a close call," murmured Maude aloud. "Golddust won't thank me for this. Neither will Captain Flash."

Before Holloway could speak she had disappeared, but he heard her steps after he had lost sight of her figure.

None but Holloway and Maude knew of the narrow escape of the inmates of the place.

In another moment the stick of dynamite would have done its work, and the adjacent hills would have trembled with the terrible explosion.

Sunset had escaped by a hair, and the Tame Rattlesnake had been saved from the vengeance of the Twins.

As Holloway reached a spot near Silver Saul's house he caught sight of a man in the street.

He watched this person, and saw him halt at the chief justice's door.

It was Sam Sherlock.

Silver Saul opened the door, and, seeing who was his visitor, he seemed put out a trifle, still he invited the Frisco sport inside.

Sandy stood in the room adjoining the one which Captain Flash opened to discover Effie, and the light fell over his tall, well-built frame.

Saul looked at his caller a moment, and threw a quick glance toward the closed door.

"Have you come to corrupt the court?" asked the chief justice.

"No! I am here, though, to talk with this same court."

Silver Saul folded his arms.

"It ain't in session just now," said he.

"That's why I'm here, for one reason. Captain Flash will demand a trial now—by daylight."

"That is news."

"But he will do this. You will be bound to grant him a trial."

"If he demands it, yes."

"Does the court of Sunset always render impartial verdicts?"

"Always. Where is the man who says it does not?"

"The high court is above suspicion, then? It is never tampered with?"

The two men stood face to face and their eyes met.

"Show me the man who dares to breathe a word against the honesty of the high court of Sunset!"

The Man of Sand said nothing for a moment, and then spoke:

"The charge has been made."

"Who makes it?"

"Never mind. Silver Saul, you've had a visitor whose purposes were not honest."

"Name him!"

"The high-sheriff of the camp has called upon you. He has talked the coming trial over with you."

"Golddust George!"

"Yes. You owe that man a great debt."

Silver Saul's gaze for a moment wavered, and he breathed hard.

"Is it not true? Did he not save your life in the mines, years ago?"

"It is true."

"And he came to you to ask that you run the high court of Sunset in the interests of a certain person."

"Who told you this? Where—"

Silver Saul checked himself abruptly, for the door of the adjoining room opened and in it stood Effie.

"This is our talk, girl," from Saul. "This is Sandy Sam, as you know, a friend of yours and Captain Flash's foe. Go back!"

The eyes of Sam Sherlock and the fair one met, and Effie's tried to give him a warning.

"Yes, go back! You're safe here," answered the Shadow Sport, and as the door closed he turned again upon Saul.

"You promised that man," he persisted.

"Who told you this?"

"The man who witnessed the bargain."

The chief justice flushed.

"Where was he?"

"Where he could see and hear all."

"Well, a man is sometimes placed under obligations he cannot overlook."

"True, but they need not make that person a traitor to the cause of justice."

"Justice will be done," asserted Saul.

"After your promise to Golddust George?"

"Yes, after that!"

"You dare not break that promise."

"I dare do anything."

"Captain Flash will come before the one supreme court of Sunset and demand a trial. I have charged him with murder. I have the proofs. I stand here alone to show that Captain Flash is the notorious Kidded Eric, King of Lariat Land, and the cool villain whose crimes have gone too long unpunished."

"He is mighty here. Sunset is still for Captain Flash, I regret to tell you."

"Yes, but one-half of them don't know him."

"The other half would not believe if it knew."

"That is doubtless true," assented Sam. "You, as court of Sunset, can give a true decision."

"I always do that."

"I don't ask the conviction of Kidded Eric."

Saul gave a quick start.

"What then?"

"I ask for the man himself."

"The living body of Captain Flash?"

"Yes."

"What would you do with him if he was placed in your hands?"

"I would take him back to the old stamping ground."

"An impossible task!" averred Saul.

"Why, you would have the wolves of these hills upon your trail. Captain Flash might ride bound beside you, but you would have the human wolves at your horse's heels. Let the court settle the whole matter."

"A tampered court?" cried the Shadow Sport. "Come, Saul, you are playing now for your friend and master."

"It is false! Listen to me, Sandy Sam! I hate every drop of blood in this man's body. There has never been a time when I did not wish that some avenger like yourself would swoop down upon Captain Flash and rid Sunset of him. I would go out of my way to show my dislike for Kidded Eric, as you call him. But, I am the chief justice of Sunset. I preside over its one court. I am expected to deal out justice unmixed with mercy."

"When the boy to-night fired hastily at Captain Flash's face I hoped that the bullet would find his head, but fate saved the wretch again. It shall not be always

thus. The time will come when fortune will turn from the man she has so long befriended. But for the episode of the shot in this house the girl yonder might now be his wife."

The Shadow Sport looked toward Effie's room.

"They tell me that that room is sacred to you, Silver Saul?" he observed.

"It is! My wife died there."

"Then you will not drive the young girl away?"

"No! I have told her that much. She shall not be molested in that chamber, with my consent."

"Then when the minions of Captain Flash come back to drag her to the altar you will interpose a hand?"

"I will. The girl is safe. I lost my head awhile ago, and but for the youth's shot she might have been taken away."

"Very well. See that you keep your word with Effie Donalds. The girl needs a protecting arm in Sunset. When Captain Flash stands before your court she may be a witness."

"I don't want to set on this case," asserted the justice. "There is a court higher than mine."

"I understand."

"Take the case before it."

"No. Captain Flash will be tried before your court. He has said that he would demand a trial there."

"And have it he shall!" exclaimed Saul. "Justice shall be dealt out, even to the Boss of Sunset, in his own domain, and he must not complain."

Five minutes later Sam Sherlock stood beneath the starry heavens outside of Silver Saul's shanty.

It was not far from midnight, and the Man of Sand, as he walked away, saw a light in the Tame Rattlesnake.

He thought of Roger, the friend who had come to his aid from the hills, and wondered if he would find him there.

With firm step, the man-hunter advanced toward the resort and boldly opened the door.

The blaze of light within blinded him for a moment, and he stopped, the observed of every one in the house.

The place, noisy up to the moment when he opened the door, suddenly grew quiet, and the eye of Sandy Sam surveyed the exciting scene.

"That's the man!" he heard a voice say at the furthest end of the room.

In an instant his eye had singled out the speaker.

"I will not wait until daylight. There have been trials by night in Sunset. The high court is always in session. The chief justice of Montana is always on the bench. I demand a trial now! There is my accuser, and he shall face me at once."

The crowd shouted their approval, and half a dozen men moved to the front, hands near their hips.

"Send at once for Silver Saul!"

A tall miner started for the door, and vanished.

Captain Flash straightened at the bar and looked vengefully at Sandy Sam, while at his side stood Golddust George, his face seamed with satisfaction as his last interview with Silver Saul rushed through his mind.

A trial by night! A trial for life and vengeance in the Tame Rattlesnake, where the accuser would stand alone in the midst of his enemies, was enough to blanch the bravo's cheek.

Sandy Sam had but a moment to make up his mind.

"That is right," he said coolly. "Let the court open immediately. I am ready. I again charge Kidded Eric, yonder, with the murder of Effie's father in the Land of the Mad Lariats, and also with that of old Raper out there among the hills!"

A short distance from the Man of Sand stood his friend Roger, whose face was now pallid, but eager.

The tenants of the Tame Rattlesnake, conscious that something very exciting was near at hand, dropped every card and watched the scene.

Seconds rolled into minutes and minutes seemed hours.

The messenger who had gone for Silver Saul had not returned, and not a few of the toughs wondered what detained him.

"I wish we had them both here," said Captain Flash, in low tones to the high-sheriff.

"Sandy Sam and Centipede?"

"No; Sam and the young sport who wanted to shoot me at Silver Saul's. You couldn't slip out there and corral him, eh, Golddust?"

Golddust George hesitated.

"Let it go. When I am irred by the mandate of the court, we'll turn our attention to Holloway. You're sure the court will stay 'ixed'?"

"I'd stake my life on it!" confidently answered the high-sheriff. "He swore it to me. He owes me his very life and—Thar he is!"

The door had opened and Silver Sam stood before them.

He looked round the place, but avoided Golddust George's penetrating gaze, and the high-sheriff wondered what it meant.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MIDNIGHT TRIAL.

Meantime not far from the Tame Rattlesnake, a little man with a Malay-like face stood watching another person, his superior in physical powers, who was helping a companion away.

Tophet was taking care of Taos, dropped beside the saloon by the revolver of Montana Maude while in the act of setting the dynamite, which would wreck the place and scatter death and destruction in every direction.

There was life yet, in Taos for he breathed hard and his teeth were set.

Tophet supported him through the shadows and every now and then looked over his shoulder toward the Tame Rattlesnake with all the viciousness of an enraged tiger.

At this scene Centipede gazed while he leaned against another shanty.

It rather amused him, for he knew that Taos had been terribly wounded, and the efforts of Tophet to drag his brother from the spot delighted the little man with the yellow skin.

"I can't git to the hills," declared Taos.

Tophet looked down into the whitening face and then back at the resort.

"You can't, eh?"

"No more than I could climb the mountain."

"You don't want ter hand in yer checks here?"

"Why not?"

"But this is Sunset."

"And he lives here! It was a woman that dropped me—the partner of Captain Flash."

"Just so. You can't find her now. She's out o' the way, and you would give out long afore you found her. It's death ter stay here."

"It's death anywhere for Taos!" moaned the wounded outlaw. "I kin crawl back and set off the stick. Of course we'd all go up in the explosion; but thar'd be sweet revenge in it, all the same."

"You can't go back."

Centipede watched Tophet pull his brother on, and followed them until he let a strange cry escape him.

"What! are they goin' to invade the captain's ranch?" he exclaimed, as Tophet turned into the walk leading to the house of Captain Flash. "They can't hide thar!"

In another moment the pair had slipped from the walk and vanished.

"Whar's the captain?" exclaimed Centipede.

He waited a while longer, and failed to catch another glimpse of the Twins, whereupon he turned and quitted the spot.

"Thar'll be Satan to pay when Captain Flash comes back," ejaculated Centipede,

believing that the Twins had taken refuge in his dwelling. "If they're really in the nest they'll find it a death-trap and the vultures will soon feast on the bodies of the Twins of Tartarus."

Taos and Tophet had turned upon Captain Flash's house.

Taos had been placed on the captain's best bed, and Tophet had taken his station near the sufferer.

"If you hear him coming," urged Taos, "let me know."

"I'll tell you, brother. Here!"

He placed a revolver in Taos' hand, and the fingers eagerly closed about the butt.

"Leave it all to me, won't you, Tophet?"

"Yes."

"You won't interfere at all?"

"On my word, no."

"That's good. Now go to the window and watch."

Tophet stationed himself at the window, from which he could look down the darkened vista of pines.

Taos set his teeth hard, and watched the man at the window. He knew that his life-trail was near its end, and but one desire animated him.

With his fingers about the revolver, he rested his head on the pillow of what might have been a bridal couch but for Silver Saul, and seemed to shut his eyes dreamily.

"Not coming yet?" he asked Tophet.

"I can't see 'im."

Taos turned his head away and swallowed hard.

"Maybe he won't come," he muttered.

Tophet did not speak, but glanced at the occupant of the bed and resumed his vigils.

"He's coming now," announced Tophet, at last, and the dying man stirred eagerly.

"Make sure it's him," he said, feebly.

"I don't want ter make a mistake."

"By Jove! it's not the captain," cried Tophet. "It's another man. He's vanished among the trees out thar—"

"A spy maybe!"

"I can't say. He'll come bye and bye, Taos, old boy, and then you shall have your last play."

At this moment, though the Twins knew it not, Silver Saul entered the Tame Rattlesnake and faced the crowd we left there.

The look he gave Golddust George, standing at Captain Flash's side, seemed to tell the high-sheriff that the court with whom he had tampered could not be depended on.

Saul advanced, and stopped in the space before the counter. He was dressed with a good deal of care, and was a little pale about the lips.

Golddust George glanced at the captain, and seemed to discern uneasiness in his face.

Did Kidded Eric read in Silver Saul's look treason and a broken promise?

"What is it?" asked Saul. "I've been sent for, as the chief justice of Sunset, I suppose, and I'm here."

His words broke the spell.

"I demand an immediate trial!" spoke the captain. "I am ready, and he said he would be so at any time," and he looked at Sam Sherlock, but the Man of Sand did not return the gaze.

"The high court of Sunset is supposed to be always in session," remarked Golddust George.

"That is true. It is always ready to hearken to the demands of justice."

"Then open my trial at once," cried the nabob of the Montana camp. "I'm impatient to know my doom. If guilty, let my punishment take place at once."

A little movement by the men, as they moved closer to Captain Flash, attracted Silver Saul, and he waved them back.

"The court must have room!" he admonished.

"Stand back, gentlemen!" cried Captain Flash. "The court is all right. It never fails to dispense justice. You know that."

Saul turned toward Sam Sherlock and seemed to recall his last interview with the Shadow Sport, but nothing indicated that he would be the impartial dispenser of justice in that court.

"Where are the witnesses?" asked the chief justice.

All eyes were turned upon the Shadow Sport as he stepped a little closer and answered:

"I am the accuser. You may also call me a witness, for I shall testify to what I found on the scene of Raper Donalds' murder."

"Proceed!"

The speaker was Captain Flash. He had folded his arms as he faced Sandy Sam, looking at him now with assumed security which perhaps deep down in his heart he did not feel.

"I found near the spot where the body lay a human foot-track, remarkably preserved," announced the detective.

"What rendered it peculiar?" asked Silver Saul.

"Certain nails in the sole of the boot that made the impression."

"The witness will describe them."

The Frisco detective did so clearly, and in a manner that carried the impression of truth with every word.

He also described the boot that must have made such a track, giving the measurements he had taken at the time of the discovery.

"Does the witness see in the house a boot similar to the one he has described?"

"It is on the right foot of the man accused of the crime!" the Shadow Sport asserted, decisively.

"On Captain Flash's foot?"

"Even so. I have seen it there, for he showed me the sole of the boot he now wears, and the nails were there!"

The Boss of Sunset looked once more at Golddust George, but not a word passed between them.

Saul avoided the high-sheriff's look and coolly turned him down.

"The jig's up!" thought Golddust. "The chief justice is against us."

Solemnly Silver Saul pointed at the boot on Captain Flash's foot, and amid a silence that seemed palpable he said in a stern voice:

"The court asks the prisoner to show the boot mentioned by the witness."

The captain seemed to hesitate.

Every eye in the house was riveted upon the boot and he felt that the crisis had come.

Why not defy the court?

He was still the nabob and Boss of Sunset, though for the time being a nominal prisoner at the bar for trial.

There were hard-lined faces near him, and eyes that looked sympathetically at him while he thought.

The silence seemed to increase in intensity, and he drew back the suspected foot.

"Will Captain Flash obey the high court of Sunset?" asked Silver Saul.

"Lift yer foot, captain!" urged Golddust George, in low tones.

Flash sullenly obeyed, and the foot was lifted for inspection.

Saul stooped and looked at the sole. He seemed to see there the proof which confirmed Sam Sherlock's testimony, and when he indicated by a gesture that the foot might be lowered, several men took long breaths of relief.

"Witnesses for the defense!" called Silver Saul.

No one stepped forward.

"The prisoner will be permitted to testify in his own behalf," he then announced.

The captain had regained his confidence. His color came back. After all he would not be condemned on the testimony of a man who had hunted him for years. Golddust had "fixed" the court and he was safe!

"The defense will not introduce any testimony," he said, haughtily. "It has the utmost confidence in the integrity of the court. It is a just court, and the defense is ready for the verdict."

The trial was over.

Brief as it was, there had been briefer ones in the history of Sunset.

Silver Saul walked to the bar and asked for a drink.

He mixed his own liquor with a coolness that intensified the excitement, and all watched him eagerly.

"I'm safe," thought Flash. "We'll have Sam Sherlock on the rack in ten minutes."

Pushing back his glass, Silver Saul turned upon the anxious crowd.

"It seems to be a clear case to the court," he began. "The prisoner at the bar has condemned himself. The boot with the marks on the sole only confirms the testimony of the prosecuting witness. The court has nothing to do but to pass sentence."

These words had the ring of doom.

The captain lost color and fell back to where his High-Sheriff stood.

"The sentence of this court is death!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HAND OF THE UNSEEN.

The court was against Captain Flash!

For half a minute the Camp Boss looked into the face of the speaker; the word "treason" was on his lips, but he did not utter it.

Perhaps the eye of that same court deterred him.

The crowd seemed relieved, but more than one hand went toward their owners' hips, but the Frisco Shadow stood as firm as a rock.

"I appeal!" cried Flash, the word leaping from his lips in startling accents. "I appeal from the verdict of the court to the men of Sunset."

Silver Saul waved his hand at the spectators.

"The prisoner at the bar forgets that there is no appeal from the high court of Sunset!" he said authoritatively.

"But I shall appeal whether it is permitted or not. I am Captain Flash, the head founder of this camp. I am also a man falsely accused by a human bloodhound who has tracked me for years. For what? For the purpose of getting even for a fancied slight in other lands."

"Ask Captain Flash if he remembers Ranch Number Six in the Land of the Mad Lariats," cried the Shadow Sport. "Ask the man standing there, with the sentence of Sunset's Court passed upon him, if he remembers the victim found dead one morning on the ranch porch and the flight that followed?"

"The prisoner has a good memory. Ask the little reptile in yellow upon whose hands is the blood of Robinet, if he remembers the crime of his master in Lariat Land? Centipede is in camp—a murderer like that man yonder! Does Captain Flash, or Kiddled Eric, deny his identity with the master of Ranch Number Six?"

"I do!"

"Go out there and find Centipede!"

"He will lie to save his neck and lengthen mine."

"He will not lie now."

"Here he is!"

The door looking into the street opened, and with a cry that startled all something human in shape fell into the light.

It picked itself up and stood revealed as Centipede, whom Montana Maude had thrown into the Tame Rattlesnake, at the open door.

"Bring the new witness before the court," commanded Silver Saul.

Centipede tried to elude the hands thrust out for him, but at last one clutched him, and he was dragged forward.

Flash stared his tool in the face, but Centipede's eyes fell.

"Who is that man?" asked Silver Saul, as he turned upon Centipede, and designated Captain Flash with a gesture.

"It is Captain Flash."

"But who was he in Lariat Land?"

"There we called him Kiddled Eric."

"The master of Ranch Number Six?"

"Yes."

Some one at this juncture set up a cry against Centipede. He was called the slayer of Robinet; the crowd seemed to move toward him as if sent forward by a given signal.

Centipede sent a swift glance toward the Man of Sand.

"I am in the toils. They will kill me if you do not save," the swift look said.

"Stand back!" ordered Silver Saul. "The witness is under the protection of this court—"

"Down with the reptile!" "Down with the purchased court of Sunset!"

The cries grew sterner and more terrible.

At this juncture Montana Maude stepped forward and placed herself beside her husband.

The men of Sunset had fallen back to let her pass and she stood boldly before them all, her hand on her weapon.

"A few minutes ago," said she, "you were on the brink of eternity. In another second you would have been blown to pieces with dynamite. The match was lit and the stick placed underneath the Tame Rattlesnake. I shot the villain and the danger passed."

"Hurrah for Montana Maud," cried the men.

She did not seem to hear the applause, but continued, with a look at her husband:

"The testimony of Centipede shall be heard. This little man, the yellow reptile, testifies with the noose about his neck; but no man shall touch him until the court of Sunset has passed sentence on him."

This subdued the crowd, and the eager, menacing faces fell back.

"Now go on. Tell all you know about the past of Captain Flash," insisted the woman.

The yellow man found his tongue; but he did not talk long.

There was a movement at the end of the counter, and Captain Flash suddenly vanished before the eyes of all!

A rear door at the right place had opened at the right time, and when the men looked again, behold! the only person there was Golddust George, and his figure seemed an impassable barrier.

The avengers of blood were baffled, and when Montana Maude stepped to her husband's side all saw that the reinforcement was invincible.

"The sentence of this court must be carried out," declared Silver Saul. "Captain Flash is still in its power, and he must pay the penalty. It is a question of the survival of your court, men of Sunset, or the continuance of one-man rule. The guilty must not escape. The hand that struck Raper Donalds down, in the mountains, and robbed him of his chart, at the same time depriving Effie of Sunset of a guardian, must not commit another heinous crime."

Silver Saul stepped back and turned his face upon the silent crowd.

Suddenly he caught sight of Centipede. "They say this man killed Robinet," said he.

Centipede seemed to swallow hard.

"We'll try him when we shall have finished the other. Captain Flash stands condemned. The murderer must pay the extreme penalty of the law."

The flight of Captain Flash was a hasty one.

The boss saw that the game played so long and coolly against fate had turned against him and that doom had stacked the cards in vengeance's favor.

Once outside the Tame Rattlesnake, he paused a moment, and with a cocked revolver in his hand looked defiantly at the structure.

He knew perhaps that Golddust George would cover his retreat with his stalwart figure, and that Montana Maude would, in all probability, stand by her newly wedded lord; and this caused a smile to form, for a moment, about his mouth.

Then he turned and fled once more.

At the end of the walk of pines he stopped and looked back.

"I can escape and live to defy them all," said he to himself. "I will yet weave a death toil for this cool-headed man-hunter from Lariat Land. I will live to get even with Sandy Sam!"

Entering his house, Flash struck a light.

In the room where so many stirring scenes of our drama have taken place he paused long enough to open the little door set in one of the walls.

Dragging from its concealment in the secret niche a little package, he strode to the table and tore it open.

The bit of parchment fell out. This he eagerly snatched up and thrust underneath his belt.

The secret of the lost bonanza was still his, the legacy of the dead; Effie's fortune was yet unfound, and he would not let the enemy get possession of it.

His eyes glittered as he looked at the parchment before he hid it away, and then he returned the other contents of the packet to their nest in the wall.

"Now," cried he, "Captain Flash will show them all that he is still Boss of the Camp!"

He opened a door which led into an adjoining room, and in a moment was stooping over a trap in the floor.

"The secrets of the big mine under ground no one knows but me," he cried. "Golddust will see to it that I am not followed below this flight of steps and—"

Captain Flash felt something like an animal upon his back.

He fell back and tried to shake off the arms that wound themselves about his throat, tightening there like the coils of a snake.

He felt the hot breath of a madman on his cheek; he heard the grated curse of some one determined to finish him then and there, and with a determined effort he dragged his assailant down into the abyss!

The trap-door closed over the pair and Flash heard it click as he struggled in the dark.

"I know him," he said to himself. "This man is Taos of Tartarus, and I am in the grip of one mortally stricken."

If one could have listened at the trap-door he might have heard some of the struggle for life, in the darkness beneath; but the sounds gradually died away, and at last none came up.

The morning that broke over Sunset after the night of excitement found the silver camp astir.

A man issued from Captain Flash's house and faced a group of men standing in the beams of the rising sun.

"He isn't thar," he announced.

"The sentence of the court, you know, Golddust, means that there shall be no respite."

"I know it, but Captain Flash has vanished."

"The den under the house may hide him."

"Search it."

Golddust spoke with some confidence.

True to his chief to the last, he believed that Captain Flash was safe, and when he waved his hand toward the house the crowd moved forward.

They found the trap-door, and the bravest descended; they trailed the desperado in the dark, finding underground long passages and rough walls, and the foremost drew back from the edge of the Round Pit in time to save their lives.

They did not find Captain Flash.

The next day and the next they kept up the hunt; they searched the intricacies of that wonderful place, now with Tophet to lead them, for had he not lost the brother he left waiting for Captain Flash in the house behind the pines? and now led by Sandy Sam, the Shadow Sport.

A week passed.

Within that time Effie, the Windflower of Sunset, became the wife of Hugh Holloway, and Montana Maude pledged herself anew to Golddust George. Centipede had been tried for the mur-

der of Robinet, and the same grim court which had passed sentence on Captain Flash pronounced the same upon him, and the tree in the square bore the swaying body of the little man.

One afternoon, a few days after the execution, a man came up from the darkness underneath the boss of Sunset's home.

The wild eye, the starved look, the tottering step all told a story of horror, and this man, staggering to Captain Flash's arm-chair, sank into it with a cry.

It was like coming back from the dead, or the return of a prisoner from the pens of starvation.

"I'll master them yet!" he cried, as his eyes rolled. "I am more than Captain Flash! I am the same old Kidded Eric!"

Just then some one came up the walk; the man in the chair caught sight of him and stirred excitedly.

The door opened, the man looked into the room, and then bounded forward.

"At last!" cried the visitor. "You concluded to come back, eh? Well, I'm ready to take you back to Lariat Land. The camp has turned you over to me, and you will see Ranch Number Six once more."

Captain Flash pushed back his chair and started to his feet; the mien of a cornered lion was his.

"Back there? Never, Sandy Sam!" he cried. "You don't know Kidded Eric."

The Shadow Sport looked at the drawn face and the sunken eyes.

"They've hanged Centipede!" the Shadower spoke. "Effie is the wife of Holloway; the camp reprobates you. You have been condemned as a felon, where once you remained supreme. The murder of Raper Donalds can be avenged in the land to the south where, as Kidded Eric, you orphaned Effie of Sunset. I am ready to take you away."

"You? I say no!"

The hand on the back of the chair seemed to sink into the wood, and as Sandy Sam reached out to tear it loose there was a cry, and Captain Flash fell against the wall.

The Frisco Sport turned as the door opened and faced the man who had pushed it in—Golddust George.

"I have my man!" from the Sport-Detective.

"And so has death!" from the high-sheriff.

Sam Sherlock looked at the man on the floor.

It was true! His trail was ended! Before him lay the man of two names and many crimes whom he had hunted down. The finger of the Unseen had avenged the deed.

In the bosom of Captain Flash was found the precious chart, and the solution of it made more than one heart happy.

THE END.

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